

Better By Knowing



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Improve herds by gaining feedlot information.

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Information leads to improvement. Take the Iowa Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity (TCSCF) and its cooperators as a case in point.

For 30 years the program has helped facilitate data flow for producers of every size, and a recent analysis shows cattle are getting

better. That's because many of the 1,000 herd operators in 23 states and Canada who fed 230,000 calves with TCSCF over the years used the feedlot and carcass data in selection and management decisions.

“With this information, they produce healthier, more docile cattle that gain better, grade better and are more profitable,” says futurity manager Darrell Busby.

The share of Angus-sired cattle in the database was strong in 2002, at 84.4%, but

that moved up to 89.1% last year. More recently, the black-hided cattle grading Choice increased from 70.8% in 2007 to 78.72% in 2011 as Prime grades moved up and Select grades dropped off considerably.

Improved genetics

Busby says management changes on the ranch and minor adjustments in futurity feeding strategies may have helped that along. However, the biggest impact comes from improved genetics, he says.

“That shows up in our sire summary. Some of the top AI (artificial insemination) sires in the country are in the top of our sire summary. People are moving to better genetics,” Busby says. “And it doesn't matter what ZIP code the calves come from. The genetics work anywhere from North Dakota to southern Georgia.”

Gary Fike, beef cattle specialist with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) and a member of the TCSCF board, notes feedyard delivery weights during the last 10 years increased from 629 pounds (lb.) to 655 lb. as final carcass weights moved up in step.

“Emphasis on genetic selection for growth is part of that shift, and the Angus breed has definitely played a role there,” he says. “Also, with the cost of feed where it is, cattle are staying on grass, wheat pasture or some other lower-cost forage before they enter the feedlot. Heavier in, heavier out.”

That could be giving cattle more chance to reach their quality grade potential. Looking at a subgroup in the study — cattle fed at CAB-licensed feedlots — marbling scores increased by almost 30 points in the last 10 years.

“Besides the heavier weights today, more seedstock producers are paying attention to marbling, realizing they can add it without hurting any other trait,” Fike notes. “Those who buy the improved bulls produce better calves, and then earn carcass premiums by feeding or partnering in the feedlot.”

Thirty points may not sound like much

when 100 Marbling Score points make up a USDA quality grade, but Fike points out the difference between Select and Choice, or between lower Choice and CAB brand acceptance is a single point. “That can make a \$50- or \$60-per-head difference these days.”

Crunching the numbers

Another point of interest Busby gleans from the analysis: the profit potential of open replacement heifers. Yes, there are many heifers fed in the program despite its steer futurity name.

“In some parts of the country, those females are valued like cull cows. If they know the age the heifers can be fed out at less than 30 months of age, doing that makes sense,” Busby says.

The few (2.4%) TCSCF arrivals coming in with high body-condition scores of 6 to 8 are mostly of that class, he says. Quality grade and profit per head have been equivalent to those of lower body-condition score.

Besides the number crunching and trend analysis opportunities over time, Busby says individual producers gain even more valuable take-home insights. They see the impact one bull can make for better or worse. They see the full rationale for their health programs, and much more.

“Ninety percent of the cattle we feed are from consignors that we feed for year in and year out,” Busby says. “Those people are making gradual changes to improve their herds. We have about 10% of cattle that come from a new ranch each year. There are some who won't use the information, and pretty soon they drop out; but the majority of our consignors, with us from five to 20 years, are still amazed at the statistics we give them, and they learn how to use that to make good management decisions.”

Editor's Note: Jill Dunkel is a freelance writer. Certified Angus Beef LLC provided this article.