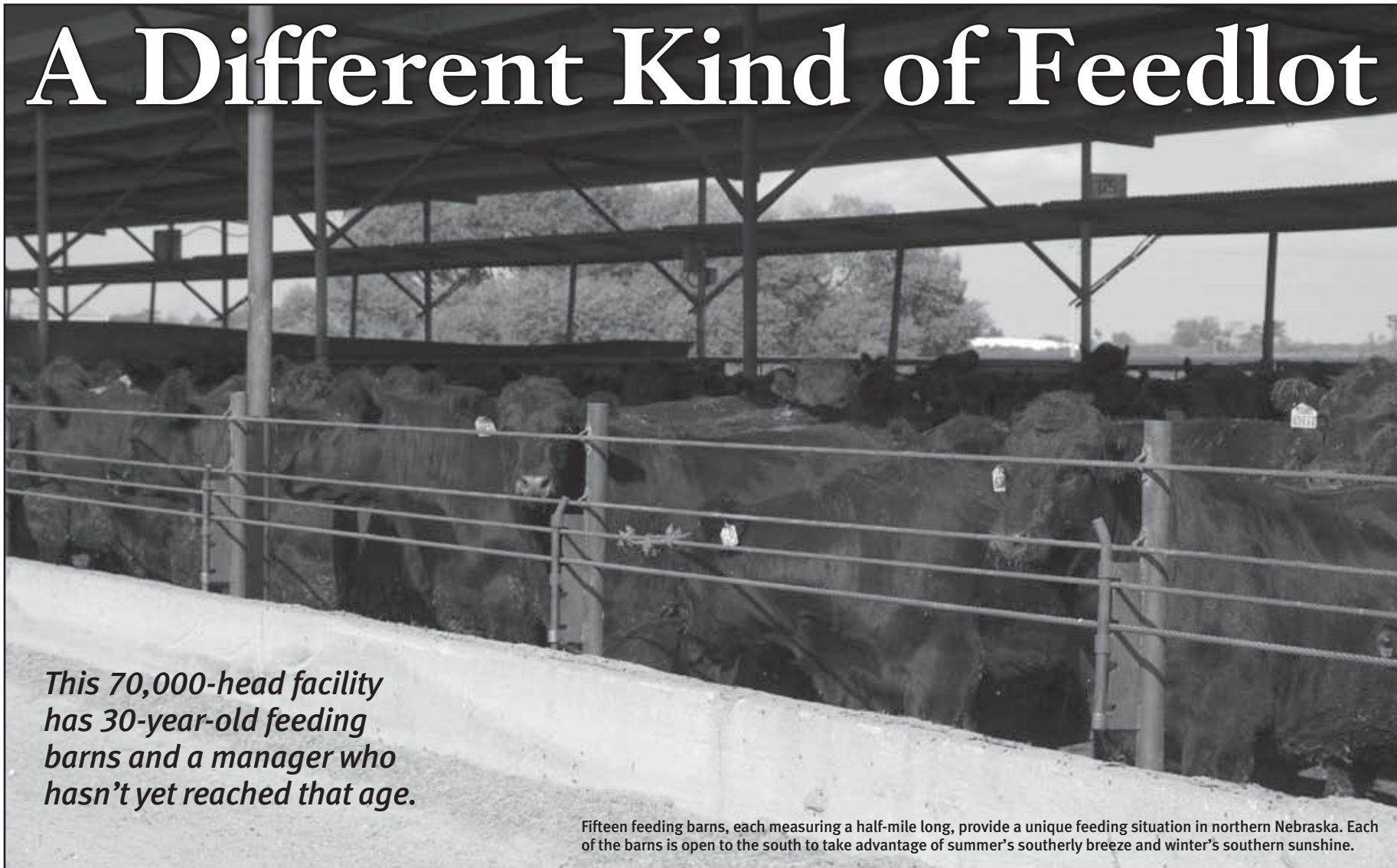


# A Different Kind of Feedlot



*This 70,000-head facility has 30-year-old feeding barns and a manager who hasn't yet reached that age.*

Fifteen feeding barns, each measuring a half-mile long, provide a unique feeding situation in northern Nebraska. Each of the barns is open to the south to take advantage of summer's southerly breeze and winter's southern sunshine.



"Each of the barns has capacity for about 4,000 head," Manager Case Gabel explains. "The obvious advantage to feeding under cover is protection from weather, especially during the winter, but also providing shade in the summertime."

*Story & photos by*  
**TROY SMITH**

Certainly, no two cattle feeding operations are alike. Most of them, however, are similar in appearance. Most of them, and especially the bigger operations, have that typical feedlot "look." When describing it, people might mention a feedmill and stores of feedstuffs. They're likely to mention rows of cattle pens divided by alleys from which feed is delivered to fenceline bunks.

You see that at HerdCo, a northern Nebraska feedlot where close to 10,000 head of cattle can be penned and fed in fairly familiar fashion. But even a casual observer notices the obvious difference at HerdCo. It's those feeding barns — 15 of them, each measuring a half-mile in length. Nearly 60,000 head can be fed in those barns.

Located northwest of Bartlett, Neb., this facility isn't new, and it's arguable whether constructing one like it would be economical today. It was built and operated nearly 30 years ago by Foxley & Co. The 1990s brought a change in ownership and company name. In 2000, HerdCo sold to its current owners, a group of producers with varied ranching and cattle-feeding interests. The current manager is Case Gabel.

"Each of the barns has capacity for about 4,000 head," Gabel explains. "The obvious advantage to feeding under cover is protection from weather, especially during the winter, but also providing shade in the summertime. Generally, cattle in the barns stay cleaner than those in outside pens."

Each of the barns is open to the south to take advantage of summer's southerly breeze and winter's southern sunshine. Also, the position of panels on the backside of each building can be adjusted to alter airflow across the interior pens. The design features help prevent blowing snow from collecting inside the pens or drifting over the feedbunks.

During periods of dry weather, with moderate temperatures, the barns offer little or no performance advantage. Under those conditions, cattle fed in outside pens may outperform a like set of cattle fed inside, admits Gabel. It's a different story when the weather turns nasty. When it's really wet or snowy and temperatures turn toward either extreme, cattle fed undercover tend to perform better.

"I can't guarantee that feeding under a roof will deliver superior performance for every pen of cattle," Gabel says, "but typically, feed conversion rates are improved for

cattle fed inside during periods of changeable or harsh weather."

That's not surprising. Research has provided examples of reduced feed input costs for cattle fed in covered facilities. For example, South Dakota State University data suggest feeding cattle under a roof may improve feed efficiency by as much as 4%.

Relief from mud is an obvious advantage, and there is no runoff from HerdCo's covered pens. Nor is there a need to maintain loafing mounds as is required outside.

The barns have slatted concrete floors, allowing manure and urine to pass through into pits underneath. The pits are equipped with agitators, creating slurry that is pumped into trucks for application to the company's nearby irrigated farmground. Gabel says the manure has a higher value as fertilizer, since it is not mixed with dirt like manure cleaned from outside pens.

## **Feeding program**

The farming enterprise provides only 10%-15% of the feedlot's need for corn, so the majority of grain, as well as hay supplies, are purchased locally. Preferring dry rations to those built around wet corn, HerdCo uses a steam-flaker

*(Continued on page 92)*

## A Different Kind of Feedlot *(from page 90)*

to process grain. Though more common among High Plains feedlots, steam-flaking is a bit unusual in this region. According to Gabel, the process enables cattle to better utilize starch in the grain, which enhances conversion.

Praised for its relatively high energy and protein content and competitive cost,

distillers' grains are an important ration ingredient for most area feedlots. Often, the product is used at relatively high inclusion rates. It provides a significant portion of the ration's energy and allows for lower levels of corn in the mix. However, HerdCo uses a minimal amount of wet distillers' grains.

Gabel recognizes the product's nutrient value and likes how it enhances ration texture and palatability, but inclusion rates are kept low. According to Gabel, the cost of distillers' grains is not low enough to offset the efficiency of gain achieved with steam-flaked corn.

"We're very cost-driven," Gabel

adds, "so nothing is carved in stone. We could change our preference for feed ingredients in the future. It just depends on the cost of the ration and the performance it delivers."

### Angus preferred

Historically, the company has owned 60%-65% of the cattle it feeds. Gabel says that's likely to change, too, as the operation gears up for more custom feeding. The cattle purchased by HerdCo — both calves and yearlings — come from all over cattle country. And the company recognizes the added value of cattle from herds where genetics,



### Variety offers advantages

Few managers with responsibility for 70,000-head feeding operations have yet to celebrate their 30th birthday. And Case Gabel has been at the helm of HerdCo only since March 2009. But he doesn't lack for practical experience.

Originally from Colorado, Gabel's family has long been engaged in both cattle feeding and cow-calf operations. While growing up and while attending Colorado State University, Gabel worked in his family's feedlot. Following graduation he was employed by Swift & Co. packing. He later worked as a market analyst for Cattle-Fax.

"The neat thing about this business is the great variety of goals that different producers have. That's good, because there is room for variety in the marketplace," says Gabel.

"Consumers' preferences vary. I think they all want safe, affordable beef, but different consumer segments have different ideas about what is affordable. I don't think the market

health and nutrition are well-managed. Source and age verification can add value to feeder cattle, Gabel says, as does preconditioning and weaning calves for at least 45 days.

“To me, big Angus steers from reputable herds are the most fun to feed — the kind that gain well and convert feed into high-quality beef,” Gabel says. “That kind sells well on a grid. We like to market cattle on a grid whenever we can. We always sell cattle dressed; never live.”

HerdCo and the Gabel family both manage commercial cow-calf operations in Colorado and Nebraska. Calves are

retained and finished for market, so the breeding program offers clues to the type of cattle they like to feed.

“The cows are Angus-based, and we use a lot of Angus bulls naturally and through AI (artificial insemination). We do like a little Continental blood in the calf. A quarter is about right,” Gabel states.

“Efficiency is our thing. We seek efficiency in the cow herd and in the feedlot.”

Gabel says HerdCo has bought, fed and profited from different kinds of cattle, too. Always looking for opportunities to lock in a profit, the company buys big Northern yearlings, Southeastern calves and just about everything in between.

“Wherever there is an opportunity to make money,” Gabel says, “we’re interested.”

The bottom line is “all-important” to a feeding operation, he adds. And in that regard, HerdCo is not very different from any feedlot.



The pits are equipped with agitators, creating slurry that is pumped into trucks for application to the company's nearby irrigated farmground.



really wants totally cookie-cutter beef, and a cookie-cutter approach to beef production won't work anyway.”

Gabel says the wide variety of production environments won't allow that approach. Given their environment, how cattle perform on the ranch, in the feedlot and on the rail are more important than how they look.

“Something I learned at Cattle-Fax was that data is more important than some phenotypic goals,” Gabel states.

Sure, structural correctness and functional soundness are very important, but Gabel believes those things can be found in more than just one type of cattle. He wonders, for example, if some producers worry too much about breeding for cows of an “ideal” frame size.

“If a cow is efficient, frame size isn't such a big deal. There are efficiencies within various types of cattle,” Gabel adds. “The challenge is to find them and put them to work for you.”