



Left: Bryan Moes, an SDSU ag engineering student from Florence, S.D., gained hands-on experience as this year's Opportunities Farm summer intern.



An Opportunity to Learn

South Dakota feedlot conveys production tips to students, public.

Story & photos by
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Matt Loewe has no qualms about sharing production secrets. In fact, his goal is to help neighbors become more competitive, encourage young people in agriculture and give back to the industry.

Loewe manages the Opportunities Farm, a cattle-

feeding and grain operation near Lennox, S.D. A project of the South Dakota State University (SDSU) Foundation, the farm was donated in the spring of 2001.

"Whatever we do here, we hope to be able to share that information — good, bad or otherwise — so that students or Extension personnel can share it with the public," Loewe says. "That's part

of our whole mission — to share everything."

SDSU students use the farm for class studies and small-scale research projects.

"They have an actual set of numbers they can deal with," Loewe says. "They have actual animals that produce actual pounds of manure."

Real life can help illustrate textbook examples.

"It's a little more hands-on," says Loewe, who received both his undergraduate and master's degrees from SDSU. "They can see their recommendations come to life." The farm offers internships and scholarships, paid for by farm profits.

The entire setup, from the four-member advisory board to the farm name, was the vision of its benefactor, LeRoy Poppens.

"He wanted to see this farm provide opportunities to new students, potential farmers or ranchers," says Arlan Hagena, Lennox-area farmer and one

neighbor Poppens chose for the board. "He wanted the profit that would come off the farm to benefit somebody young getting a start."

The board meets once a month to help Loewe and his wife, Paula, the farm's office manager.

"Matt and Paula are a team there, and doing an excellent job," Hagena says. "I try to keep my hands off and serve just exactly as the name says — an advisory board."

Decisions like equipment purchases and facility upgrades might be brought up for discussion at the meetings.

The Loewes understand working on the Opportunities Farm is different from a university research farm.

"We need to farm it as though it was our own, not a small plot research facility. We need to farm in the realm of business." And yet, the business needs to be transparent, to help producers and students see how and why things do or don't work.



Matt Loewe and his wife, Paula, take pride in the farm, operating it as if it were their own. The couple lives on the farm with their two daughters, Madeline (left) and Kathryn.

CAB opportunities

Opportunities Farm added one more link in its information chain this spring when it became a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed partner. That allows data from the 960-head feedlot to be compared with information from 69 other CAB feedlots in 14 states.

"We were doing most everything to fit the program anyway," Loewe says. Due to location, feeding calves with good Angus genetics is the norm. Employees of the SDSU Meats Lab help collect individual carcass information, which can be shared with the feeding customer and CAB.

Licensed since April, 38 head had qualified for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand by early August.

"Definitely by doing this, all parties are more aware of the issues in managing cattle for quality," Loewe says.

In 2003, Opportunities Farm transformed the feedlot into three cattle housing systems: an open lot, a partially enclosed one and a confinement building. All cattle are managed the same and, of course, observed.

"When we collect information, we do it without disturbing the cattle," Loewe says. "We want to see how they perform in these environments."

When cattle arrive at the feedlot, every third one receives a red, white or blue tag. That randomly determines which of the dozen 80-head pens they'll be sorted to.

"From that point forward we just use 'best management practices,'" Loewe says.

He prefers to feed calves from a preconditioning program, but it's not a requirement.

"I've got to get healthy cattle," he notes. The "one-minute management" plan is to have fresh grass hay and clean water when cattle arrive. Then, it depends on what's been done on the ranch and the type of cattle they are.

"We use some of the [SDSU] expertise to implant for our goals," Loewe says. "We use a nutrition and an implant program together. It's got to be in tandem to maximize profitability."

The farm raises most of its feed on the seven quarters of farm ground, and usually prices grain to the feedlot once a month.

Because of the relationship with the university, visitors and tours frequently stop at the farm.

"People love to ask questions," Loewe says. "You normally see a lot of black-hided cattle around here, so we can mention that we're a CAB-licensed yard and share carcass information and all that."

Loewe hopes the association with CAB will bring up other questions.

"It just gets people thinking," he says. "There are definitely quality issues that need to be addressed in the industry. There are things that need to be done on both genetics and management."

Loewe looks forward and likes what he sees.

"We're getting a little more streamlined all the time," he says. "Each time we get a turn of cattle through, we use the information more." And, of course, he's sharing all that information with the public.



"He wanted to see this farm provide opportunities to new students, potential farmers or ranchers," says Arlan Hagena of LeRoy Poppens. Poppens chose Hagena to serve on the board of the Opportunities Farm.

