Know Feeder Genetics To Improve Bottom Dollar

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NEW HOLLAND (Lancaster Co.) — Knowing the genetic makeup of the feeder cattle you buy can translate into better dollars earned at auction time — if you follow good feed management strategies.

And efforts are under way to study the process of cattle grading and selection more thoroughly to streamline cattle "pools" and provide buyers with lots that can bring in the better dollars.

Those were the messages heard Wednesday night at the third annual Penn-State sponsored Feeder Cattle Grading Workshop at the New Holland Sales Stables.

"It's more important today to know where the cattle come from," said Dr. Phil Osborne, West Virginia University, who spoke to more than 120 cattle feeders and agri-industry representatives at the workshop.

Other experts who spoke at the workshop indicated that it's like throwing away money by trying to get results from cattle that should be separated before going to the feedlot from more potentially higher producing cattle.

Producers who want the best rate of gain and feed efficiency (closely linked genetic aspects of cattle) should obtain breeding information about the cattle before the sale. Already, extension experts and department of agriculture officials in several states are compiling such information before the beginning of special sales.

One of those sales, the Quality Assurance Sales from West Virginia University, brings performance data from individual herds into their grading and selection before feeder cattle are sold. This information, according to Osborne, is compiled into breeding program databases from the university.

Dwayne O'dell, West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) cattle grader, said that grading standards using USDA information have been in place since 1979. Most cattle going to processing in the feedlots in West Virginia finish in a range from 1,000-1,200 pounds (M, or medium, to L, or large frame), although a small (S) frame size is sometimes used. But "the average kill weights are 1,170 pounds," said O'dell.

The final finish weight is significantly dependent on management strategies.

The finish weight will depend "on how you match cattle with feed resources," he told the producers.

What special cattle "pool" sales do is segregate, for market purposes, the individual feeder animals (ranging from 600-800 pounds) before sale. Cattle that are separated before the regular auction are unthrifty, physically defective, exhibit certain diseases (loss of sight or active pinkeye problems), or those with 3- to 4-inch horns.

An evaluation worksheet is used in the process to match distinct groups of cattle that show similarities in frame scores and live weight, in addition to potential attributes related to expected average daily gain (ADG), days on feed, a muscle score, and estimated final weight. During the workshop, those who attended compared notes on how they would judge 10 different cattle in terms of estimated live weight, frame score, and other factors.

The first animal, an all black steer, weighed exactly 730 pounds (estimates from those attending put the weight about 750-780 pounds), with an M+ frame score, with a muscle score of about 1.5. The cattle was a "pretty decent steer" said O'dell, which should finish in the 1,250-1,275 pound range, giving a carcass from 625-800 pounds. In last year's sales, O'dell indicated the graders got "60 percent of those within 30 pounds" of estimated weight.

Knowing the genetic makeup of the feeder cattle you buy can translate into better dollars earned at auction time if you follow good feed management strategies. "It's more important today to know where the cattle come from," said Dr. Phil Osborne, West Virginia University, front and center, who spoke to more than 120 cattle feeders and agri-industry representatives at the workshop. Front, from left, Dr. John Comerford, Penn State beef specialist; Osborne; and Dwayne O'dell, West Virginia cattle grader. In back is Chet Hughes, Lancaster livestock agent.

The second steer was a black baldy, graded an M2 with a muscle score of 2. It had a much larger frame than the first calf, with a bigger head, with an estimated weight of 740 pounds (actual weight 755 pounds). The third, a brown steer, was more weighty and older, with an actual weight of 785 pounds but with an S2 score. Muscle score was 1.2. The steer would finish only in the upper 900 of the weight range, which would put him out of the board sale, according to Osborne.

Dr. John Comerford, Penn State extension beef specialist, indicated that it is important to look at the economic realities when having to manage these types of steers. Those who want to push these types of older, small framed feeders to heavier kill weights are literally "throwing money down a rathole," according to Comerford.

"It takes 13 pounds of dry matter for every one pound of gain after 1,000 pounds of liveweight," Comerford indicated. It doesn't benefit holding onto the animals beyond the 1,200 pound range, trying to get additional gain.

With all the grading details used to help keep databases on the pooled cattle sales, even a "temperament score" could someday be a possibility to help buyers watch

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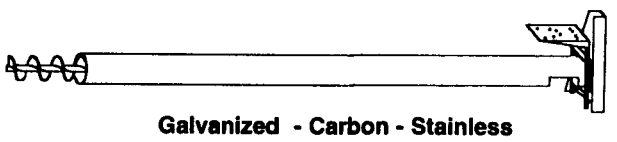

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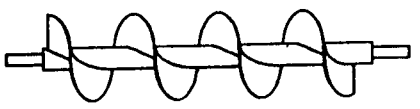

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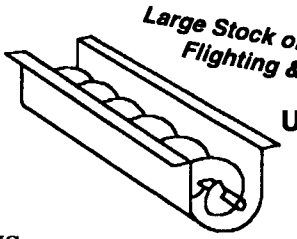

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