

Information is Key to Retaining Ownership in Strong Calf Market

by Jill J. Dunkel

With the calf market generating prices that haven't been seen in years, retaining ownership of calves through the feedyard is taking a back seat for some in order to capitalize on high prices and increased profits. "Retaining ownership is a hard sell right now," says Jim Meetz, manager of Lane County Feeders in Dighton, Kansas. "Feedyards understand ranchers need a big pay day."

But Meetz contends there is still one important reason to retain ownership, even in a strong market — information. By getting individual animal information, a producer is given the tools to better his herd, which could make the difference in producing a profit in a year with lower prices.

To make retaining ownership easier, Lane County Feeders can partner with ranches on their cattle. "By partnering, the rancher can

capture the market on some of his calves, own some through the feedyard, and get the data on all of them," Meetz says. Financing is also available on the cattle as long as the rancher keeps some equity per head. "We can also buy complete lots, and the rancher can still get the information, as long as he requests it.

"Using our Electronic Cattle Management system, we can provide individual animal information for carcass quality and performance statistics, and keep stress of processing to a minimum. Performance data is an area that is often overlooked, but it contributes 60 to 70 percent of the total profitability of a calf," he says. The carcass information provided by Lane County Feeders in conjunction with Micro Beef and Excel is actual measured carcass data. "The carcass charac-

teristics are physically measured. So the rancher is provided with an objective measurement instead of a subjective evaluation by the USDA grader. That is an important advantage of our program if the rancher intends on making improvements," Meetz says.

Lane County's ECM system can match individual measured carcass and live performance data with pre-feedlot history and health history so producers have the necessary information to make improved genetic decisions. "We'll do all we can to help interested ranchers make improvements in their herds," he says. "And we hope they do take advantage of the information and make improvements. By culling to bottom 10 to 20 percent, or closely examining their bull or cow battery, the overall profitability of their calves can be increased." ♦

How the System Works

The electronic cattle management system (ECM) is designed to keep stress to a minimum. The cattle are moved through the corrals, crowd tub and snake, (which was designed by Temple Grandin) into the electronically controlled system.

1 The cattle enter the 5-chute system on the right from the snake. This starts a process that moves the cattle through a series of electronically controlled gates. Each stop, or chute, has a special function:

1) measuring height, 2) video images of side and top, 3) weighing, 4) ultrasound, and 5) shots and tagging.



2 The video screen indicates where the cattle are and what pen they will go into, according to the top of the screen, at left. The position of, or condition of the cattle in the system is color-coded, bottom left. The position of the gates is indicated, bottom center.

3 The cattle exit the last chute, and the computer opens the gate for the specific home pen they are to go into.

This all sounds and looks quite complex, but this operation is quiet and smooth. Watching

cattle processed through the system one notices the differences between this and the traditional methods of processing cattle. ♦

