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Genetic strategy benefits cattle producers

By Dave Bergmeier

Today's genetic tools are the best the cattle industry has ever had to work with and they can add to the bottom line for those who take advantage of them in their decision-making processes, according to a presenter at the Aug. 5 Cattle U and Trade Show in Dodge City, Kansas.

Tom Brink, CEO of Red Angus Association of America, Commerce City, Colorado, spoke about why genetics matter in the feedyard in his presentation to cattle producers.

"Wherever you sit in the industry—buying, selling, backgrounding or feeding—genetics make a difference," he said.

"Genetics are at work every minute of every day," Brink noted. Genetics determine about a third of feeding performance and carcass outcomes. "It's not just luck," he said.

He believes in working with breed associations and other institutions that provide accurate performance tests, particularly on bulls.

Good genetics in a cattle herd will reward the producer through greater efficiency, higher revenue, and an improved bottom line, he said.

Humans, he says, are good examples of how genes and genetics work and while coaching and the drive to succeed are important, it also takes superior DNA to succeed in the highest level of sports competition. Former NFL star Jordy Nelson and current NFL stars Patrick Mahomes and Russell Wilson all had remarkable raw talent. Even with superior coaching, their genetics put them ahead of others.

"While genetic discussions are often centered around bulls, heifers and calves," Brink said, "rarely do we talk about genetics as it pertains to a feedyard."

In his presentation, he detailed several studies before the cattle headed to a feedyard for finishing and then rated their carcasses. One Top Dollar Angus study involved two Angus sires—one was in the top end with high-ranking Expected Progeny Differences for growth and carcass traits and the second sire in the bottom 10%. Brink said for comparison purposes these two sires were at each end of the bell curve.

The bulls were paired to black-baldy heifers, with 18 calves produced from the top bull and 13 from the lower-genetic-merit bull. The offspring showed a large difference in gross value per head: \$2,139.49 for the high-genetic-merit bull compared to \$1,974.57 for the other bull.

Marbling score was significantly higher in the offspring of the top bull plus that bull produced offspring that weighed on average 926 pounds compared to the second

bull's offspring that weighed on average 889 pounds.

"Genetic differences created a gross value difference of more than \$218 per head in one generation," Brink said.

The CEO said understanding the importance of genetics does pay off throughout the chain, he said. While it is true high-powered cattle will likely eat more feed, they will be more efficient with it and may also stay healthier when conditions are less than ideal.

One technique is to not always think of the cattle as a single herd but to break them into smaller sub-groups to help with decision making, Brink said.

"Genetics create significant performance and value differences and that's why genetics matter in the feedyard and why they are worth your consideration whether we are buying or selling feeder cattle. It makes a definite difference."

He also presented other studies that dealt with calf crops that can help the producer increase average weaning weights by eliminating low-end genetic calves. "Buying better genetics is a win-win for producers," he concluded.

Why produce cattle in the bottom half of the bell curve? Cattlemen have tools so they will not only produce the higher performing cattle but use sophisticated data to decide when animals need culled.

"I call them genetic thieves," Brink said of bottom-half performers. "Every low genetic merit calf in my herd or your herd is taking money out of our back pocket."

Wayne Cockrell, the former manager of the Carter Ranch in Oakwood, Texas, believes that eliminating bottom-end heifers as a strategy works wonders to accomplish that task and Brink agreed. Cockrell used this strategy over 4 to 5 years and totally revolutionized his Brangus-based cowherd.

Brink noted that Kansas State University Professor Emeritus Ken Odde said prophetically a few years ago that the past 20 years were about the animal's health and the next 20 years will be about cattle genetics and Brink concurred. Odde was the department head of animal sciences and industry.

Brink said it pays to pursue objective information. "We don't want to get caught looking backward," he said. "We sometimes complain about margins, but we are often reluctant to change our practices. Genetics can be leveraged into your operation to make real and lasting improvements that improve profitability."

Brink, in answering a question about the ongoing drought throughout the western High Plains, said that resources must be taken into account by ranchers and feeders on multiple fronts. Less roughage available and



Tom Brink, CEO of Red Angus Association of America, believes that implementing a genetics program pays dividends in the feeders, too. (Journal photo by Kylene Scott.)

higher feed costs may mean that producers will need to look at genetics to help guide them to cattle that are more efficient in how they convert feed into gain.

In answering another question, he recommends the purchase of registered bulls with genomically enhanced EPDs. He also notes that genomic testing heifer replacement candidates in commercial herds is a good practice, too.

In answering a question about third-party verification, he said there's growing interest in this practice. For Top Dollar Angus, a commercial feeder cattle certification program that focuses on genetics, the cattle must be at least 50% Angus or Red Angus. They must also rank in the top 25% for growth and carcass traits, Brink said. A commercial genomic test costs \$25 to \$30 per head, so his advice to producers is to potentially start with 10 heifers, evaluate the scores and talk to knowledgeable people in the industry and be a good listener.

"Genetics can do amazing things that we in the beef industry are just beginning to understand," Brink concluded.

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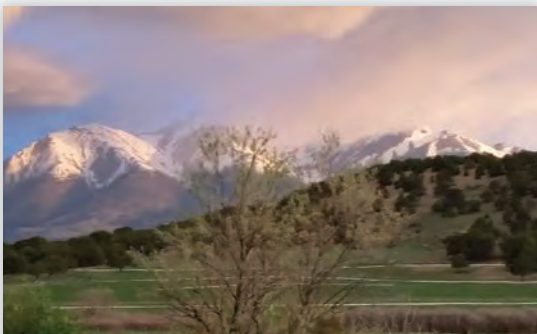
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Is your operation prepared for a wildfire?

By Lacey Vilhauer

After another year of intense and dangerous wildfires blazing across the High Plains, wildfire preparedness was a key topic at *High Plains Journal's* Cattle U and Tradeshow, which was held Aug. 4 and 5 in Dodge City, Kansas. Clinton Laflin, livestock Extension agent at Kansas State Research and Extension and survivor of the Four County Fire that took place Dec. 15, 2021, spoke on this subject at the event. He discussed wildfires and the lessons he learned from his firsthand experience with this type of disaster. Laflin, who lives in Russell County, Kansas, owns a registered Angus operation called C Bar L Cattle Company.

According to Laflin, the Four County Fire burned over 200,000 acres in Russell, Ellis, Osborne and Rooks, Kansas, counties. Extremely dry and windy conditions were major contributors to the fast-moving nature of the blaze that burned homes, scorched pastures and killed livestock and two people.

"They clocked wind speeds that day at 106 miles per hour at the Russell Airport," Laflin said. "That's high enough to be a category two hurricane. When you combine fire and 106 mph winds and dry fuel, things can get out of hand pretty quick."

Laflin counts himself lucky that most of his cattle survived the fire.

"While we were impacted by the initial shock and expanse of an event like this, we really came out on the backside of it and were very fortunate," he said.



Clinton Laflin, Livestock Extension Agent at Kansas State Research and Extension and survivor of the Four County Fire speaks about wildfire preparedness at Cattle U & Tradeshow. (Journal photo by Lacey Vilhauer.)

When a disaster such as wildfire occurs, the agriculture community is quick to lend a hand to their fellow producers and this time was no exception. However, Laflin said it is important to choose extremely

organized individuals to keep track of donations, manage the rebuilding of infrastructure, and send support to those affected by the disaster. Additionally, he reminds producers to not be afraid to accept assistance in this scenario.

"Understand if you go through a traumatic event like this, as ranchers, we're not good at asking for help, but in this situation you're going to need it," he said.

Laflin also emphasized the significance of relationships if a cataclysmic event occurs. He said the relationships he had built over time with bankers, insurance agents, neighbors, emergency personnel, and livestock transporters were particularly important when the Four County Fire struck.

"Don't undervalue the power of the relationships with those around you. Within a week of the fire, we had relocated cows to my mom and stepdad's place in southeast Kansas, two places in Nebraska, and one place in Oklahoma. If it hadn't been for our support system to be willing to take those cattle in for six months, we wouldn't be able to focus on rebuilding our infrastructure. After something like this you have to focus, compartmentalize, and just get things done. The people you have around you after a big, horrible event like this are key."

Additionally, Laflin stressed the importance of keeping a current backup of farm and ranch records in case of an emergency. Backups are critical, especially for registered operations, but they are also important for commercial operations. He also recommended taking photos of homes and interior items to have a reference of inventory items on hand. He suggested storing backups in a fire safe away from your home or to store records in a digital system such as the Cloud so they can be accessed if your home burns. Finally, Laflin believes it is crucial for everyone to develop a crisis management plan for their household.

"Ask yourself where is an accessible place if you're leaving in an emergency, what are my most critical threats and needs in case of a disaster and who will I call first that will help me in the aftermath of an emergency? Write these down in a plan of action."

He suggests going over a crisis management plan once a year—especially if you have children—so everyone knows what to do in case of an emergency.

"No one ever thinks that this is going to happen to them," Laflin explained. "I darn sure didn't. But I want you to ask yourself if you're ready for this."

Lacey Vilhauer can be reached at 620-227-1871 or lvilhauer@hpj.com.

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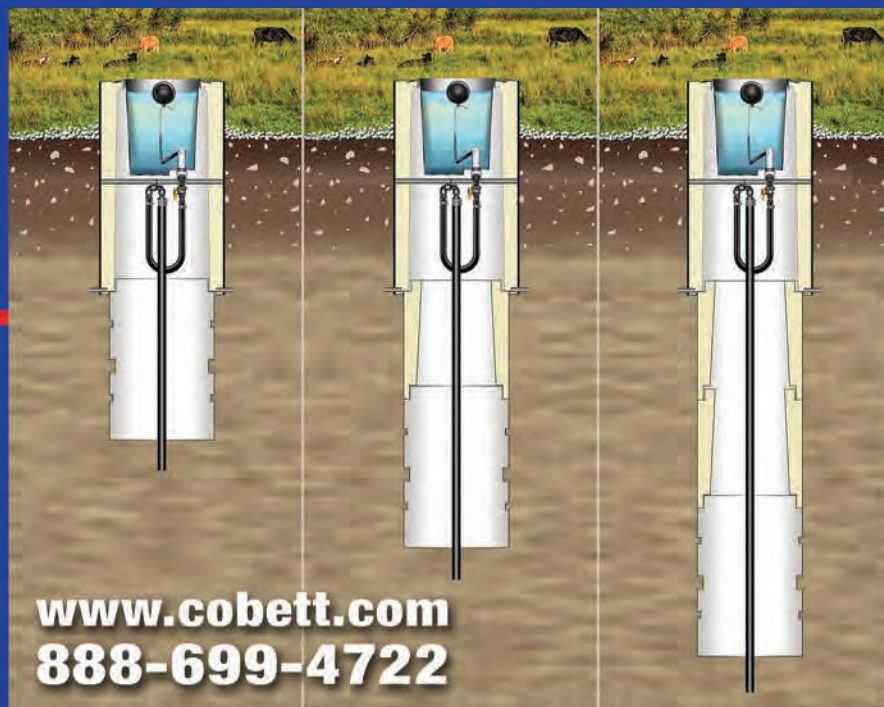
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Purdue launches interactive dashboard to track meat sentiment in news, social media

By Steve Koppes

Purdue University's Center for Food Demand Analysis and Sustainability has added a meat sentiment dashboard to its roster of free-access food system dashboards. The new dashboard, updated weekly, shows the sentiment and volume of meat and meat alternative mentions in social media and online news.

Users may explore the sentiment and volume of #Meat mentions in all 50 states individually for social media or the entire country in a narrowly or broadly defined time range starting with April 2020 in online news and social media.

"The general perception is more positive than what the average person might guess," said Nicole Olynk Widmar, professor and associate head of agricultural economics at

Purdue. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, shoppers may have been unhappy with meat availability. Meat was available, but not always exactly what shoppers wanted, when and where they wanted it.

"Perception is going to reflect a few key headlines that may or may not have correctly reflected the state of the industry. This dashboard gives you a chance to look more holistically across the different products," she said.

The dashboard's color-coded sentiment gradient ranges from dark green for 100% positive to dark red for 100% negative. On social media in Indiana from April 2020 to July 2022, for example, poultry had a net sentiment of 49.30, followed by beef at 39.72 and pork at 37.30. Plant-based meat

alternatives, meanwhile, rated a barely positive net sentiment at 3.20. The volume of relevant daily posts during this period ranged from a high of 2,955 to a low of 1,485.

In the news nationwide for the same time period, poultry (3 million posts) and pork (2 million posts) both had net sentiments of 32. Beef came out with a positive net sentiment of 29 over 1 million posts. Plant-based meat alternatives had a net sentiment of 26 over 387,000 posts.

Individual companies in various industries have a profit motive to privately collect and analyze data relevant to the demand for their own products. But when it comes to big data and agriculture, "It's just sitting there and not being used as well as it could be," Widmar said.

Widmar discussed using social media analytics to better understand how people perceive food products such as milk and eggs, among other issues, at Purdue's "Dawn or Doom 2018" conference. In 2019, she published an article on the insights that big data provides into public perception of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In 2020, Widmar and Courtney Bir of Oklahoma State University noted the various ways of using public data for the public good.

And in 2021, Widmar and four co-authors published another article, on "The anatomy of natural disasters on online media: hurricanes and wildfires," in the journal *Natural Hazards*. The article describes how watching data flow in response to natural disasters can help government organizations identify who needs help when shortages truly occur.

The dashboard is a collaboration between Widmar and Jayson Lusk, the head and Distinguished Professor of Agricultural Economics at Purdue, who leads the CDFAS. They conceived the meat dashboard idea following meat-market disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic that spurred news headlines of a broken U.S. food system. Widmar and Lusk serve as co-authors of the dashboard, along with CFDAS postdoctoral research associate Jinho Jung and research data analyst and visualization specialist Annapurni Subramaniam.

CFDAS collected the data in collaboration with NetBase Quid through its Intelligence Connector tool. An article published in the July 2022 issue of the journal *Meat Science* details the data-gathering methods used.

The meat sentiment dashboard brings to seven the number of dashboards in the "Supply and Production" category. Also available are two price dashboards and two consumer spending dashboards.

The methods include writing the search algorithms to exclude references to "Peppa" or "Porky" the cartoon pigs in the search for traffic about food pork, for example. Or calling someone "a chicken" or saying that someone has "a beef" with another person instead of talking about meat for eating.

The recent *Meat Science* article analyzed the "Perception versus reality of the COVID-19 pandemic in U.S. meat markets." In that article, Widmar and three co-authors noted wrote that "analysis of online media and U.S. production and cold storage data do not support the narrative that the system 'broke,' but was perhaps 'strained' and 'responded efficiently.'"

Widmar and Lusk decided that as a land-grant university, Purdue could make online and social media data related to agriculture readily available for other people to ask related questions.

"That's why the dashboard is interesting beyond some of the research that we've been able to publish," Widmar said.

Widmar cautioned dashboard users to remember the social media world is messy.

"Anybody can put information out there, so it has caveats," she said. "Just because information is out there doesn't mean it was right. It really was out there; it's what people saw. But that doesn't mean what they saw was 100% accurate."

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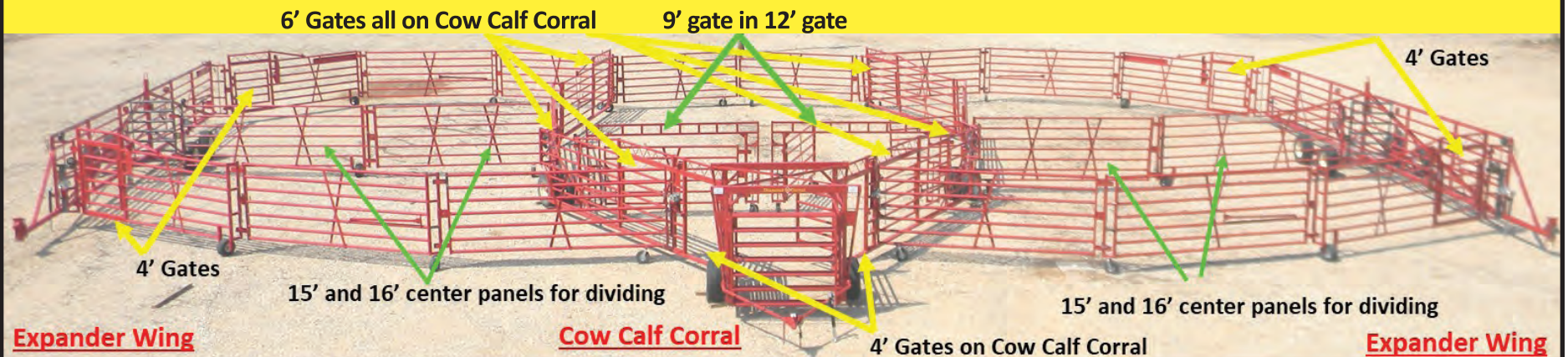
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Having a drought mitigation plan is key to cow herd survival during critical times

By **Kylene Scott**

When it comes to managing a cow herd through a drought, it's really two-fold, according to Karla Wilke, associate professor, range management cow-calf specialist at the University of Nebraska Panhandle Research and Extension Center. Wilke spoke at the recent Cattle U & Trade show in Dodge City, Kansas. The event was sponsored by the High Plains Journal.

When managing for drought, there's the grass and the cattle to consider. When it comes to the grass, Wilke said it's a bit like dieting.

"When we talk about dieting—which none of us really like to talk about either—but if you establish healthy lifestyle choices, what you need and you're exercising, that kind of thing, it's a whole lot easier to maintain the desired weight," she said.

Rather than making small healthier changes throughout the year, many wait until the second week of January rolls around to make big, drastic changes. Putting effort into those first few weeks and then quitting is often tougher on the body than making smaller choices throughout the year to make the situation stronger in the end. Long term planning for finances is similar to planning for drought.

"If we make sound financial choices throughout the year, we have a lot better financial stability than if we allow ourselves to make a lot of impulse purchases on a credit card at 18%," she said. "So then the next time we do need to purchase something and get a loan for it we can."

Drought recovery planning works the same way. If the pastures can be managed in the good years so that they're thriving, when a drought does happen, the pastures are set

up much better to survive.

"Grass that's consistently grazed has very little root capacity to withstand drought conditions," Wilke said. "If this plant was grazed hard when it was raining and grazed hard when it wasn't, we didn't have a good plan for pulling off."

In the times when the pasture was getting consistent rains, but wasn't being grazed hard, the plants have an opportunity to develop roots and other systems to thrive even when the rain starts to taper off.

"Long term use of best management practices gives us the best results for improving our pastures," she said. "Therefore having a drought mitigation plan in place before the drought requires some action is very critical part of maintaining that."

Wilke suggests putting that plan down on paper or in an Excel spreadsheet.

"That's going to include liquidating yearlings or liquidating older cows and which ones they are, early weaning, feeding strategies and trigger dates for actionable items," she said. "And the reason this is important is because as people in agriculture we're continually the perpetual optimist, right?"

Farmers and ranchers have the tendency to go forward with plans on the operation when it's dry with the hope "there's rain in the forecast next week."

"And the rain doesn't come. We don't have a plan," she said. "It would help us a lot to have a plan of what we're going to do when so that we are not backed up in the corner so bad."

Wilke said to consider:

- Know which cows go in the first 20% cut (old, poor

udders, bad attitude);

- Know whether you will early wean and keep calves or sell pairs (value of young pairs versus splits);
- How long to hold pairs—what increases the value of a pair;
- Nursing calves eat 1% of their body weight in dry matter forage before 3 months of age; and
- Lactation increases intake by 20%.

"It's very hard for me to help people who call me halfway through the summer and they're like, 'We're out of grass,'" she said. "Yeah, you were two months ago. So having those plans you can make some of those decisions that'll fit things better."

Wilke said if a producer suspects they're going to have to do some culling of the herd to get through a drought, she said to be aware of a couple things when selling during this time. Which is worth more, a young pair or a young cow and a weaned calf? Look at the drought map and see areas where other producers are facing the same thing and taking animals to the sale barn.

Figuring out how to reallocate resources to one group of cows as opposed to another set for a certain period of time needs to be considered, especially if the likelihood of them being split up when they go to the sale barn is high.

"Do you think ahead and say, well, I've got these feed resources and I'm going to put them into these pairs and then try to get that calf to 90 or 100 days of age, so that he's a more marketable split," she said.

Or do you cull others in the herd and go another direction. Wilke said it's a tough situation and one that needs thoughtful consideration.

See **Drought mitigation**, page 13



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Drought mitigation

Continued from page 12

“That’s what I mean about working through some of these things on paper ahead of time,” she said. “Gives you a much more actionable plan than hoping it will rain.”

Also be aware a nursing calf will eat 1% of its body weight in dry matter forage before it’s 3 months of age.

“So even though he’s nursing the cow, he’s using your pasture too,” she said. “Lactation increases intake by about 20%. So, think through, do you really have as much grass, as much time?”

For Wilke drought mitigation strategies should include:

- Having a drought mitigation plan with trigger date;
- Confinement feeding cows;
- Residue grazing;
- Annual forages;
- Grazing substitution on pasture; and
- Running cows and yearlings.

In the current drought situation, producers have to be creative on diets and location when it comes to feeding cattle.

“If you have some access to some corn stalks or something else—not only can we use maybe the residue there, we maybe able to use that space to be off of the pasture and feed something there,” she said.

If a producer has the ability to grow some annual forages as either a replacement to a grain crop or behind a grain crop, these cover crops can help.

“You’ve got to determine what works for you and do it in

given operation,” she said. “I don’t care if what you’re doing doesn’t look like your neighbor’s. If it works for you and you make it pencil it out then so be it.”

Meeting nutrition needs is the most critical aspect of feeding cattle during a drought situation, and there’s a lot of variation along with confinement management and resource availability that comes into play.

“Knowing that nutrient needs is critical, especially the difference between gestation and lactation,” Wilke said. “You’re making up that diet. You’ve got to know the nutrient content of the feed you’re using.”

Wilke said there are a number of UNL resources available online to help with drought mitigation. Visit <https://extensionpubs.unl.edu> or <https://beef.unl.edu/>.

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Feed ingredients: What should you buy when feed is high?

By **Kylene Scott**

When Cody Welchons, nutritionist with the Livestock Nutrition Center, looks at feed prices, he's not confident in where they're going. He is a nutritionist after all and not a merchandiser. But he does know producers need to be smart when making feed choices in today's economic climate.

"What are some alternatives that we can feed? How can we manage that?" he said.

Working with the merchandisers at LNC, Welchons has more confidence in helping others understand current feed prices.

To put the cattle business into perspective, cow costs are higher than they have ever been. Welchons said \$900 is about the average cow cost currently, and he remembers a time when \$350 to \$400 was a pretty common figure. Using Kansas Farm Management Association survey numbers, during 2016 to 2020 for feed costs, producers were spending between \$450 and \$650 for pasture and non-pasture feed costs—averaging about \$520.

"If you just, on average, figure half of that cow cost give or take is going to be in feed—for the pasture and purchased feed ingredients," he said. "That purchased feed is going to make up a significant proportion of what our total cow costs are."

So what does that mean for producers?

"That means we have to be efficient," Welchons said.

In the same KFMA survey, authors reported that high profit producers tend to spend less money per cow than lower profit operations.

"They also generated \$176 more per cow than lower profit operations," he said. "So we put those together, that's \$460 difference and net return to the farm. So its significant

and then if we're talking about the feed costs there's a difference of \$129 between those two types of operations."

According to Welchons, beef cow slaughter numbers are up 14.6% year over year through June 2022.



Cody Welchons. (Journal photo by Kylene Scott.)

"Liquidation tends to be the trend. We're on pace for the largest culling since 1986," he said. "Cow inventories are down and then you add into that we've got higher than

normal heifer slaughter."

He said CattleFax is showing almost 40% of feed inventory is heifers, which is higher than normal for heifer slaughter. Couple that in with the drought conditions through the area, it's not a pretty picture.

"Depending on how long the drought lasts, that's going to influence how long before we can start to rebuild our cow numbers and that's going to have an impact on supply feeder cattle and, therefore, calf prices," he said.

So then, what is the ingredient that's going to make the most sense and what are the price drivers?

Corn during the last 30 days has dropped quite a bit, but some producers with pre-feedlot, cow-calf, or stocker animals to feed are still going to be the most heavily impacted by prices of byproducts. Most common types of byproducts Welchons discussed was wet and dry corn distillers, gluten feed, soybean meal and soybean hulls, cottonseed hulls and meal.

"Those are what's going to make up a large proportion of those byproduct feeds that are close," he said.

There are some differences in those ingredients, and Welchons pointed out a couple of key differences. First is production timing. Corn is produced once a year, and so at harvest there's a large supply that is over demand for that current point in time. But there's also a significant storage network if price doesn't dictate selling.

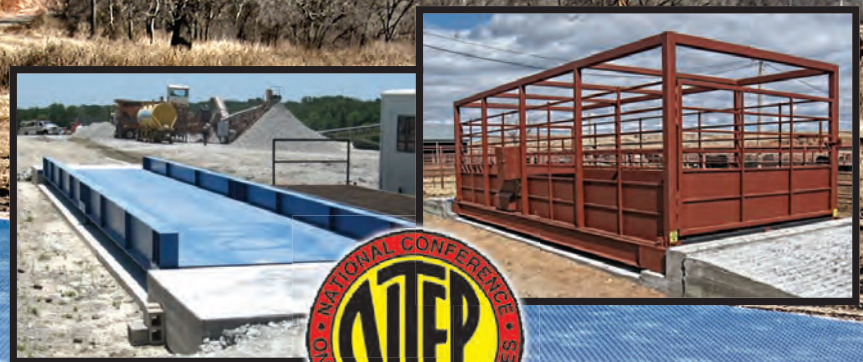
"On farm storage of corn grain has increased quite a bit over what it once was. Where previously it was mainly through our elevator," he said. "The cost of carry if you own the bins, it's probably pretty new. It's going to be less than say when you put in an elevator so there's a lot more on farm storage."

See **Ingredients**, page 15

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Ingredients

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Second is geography. Corn is widespread in both storage and production.

“Meanwhile, we look at byproducts,” he said. “There’s a little bit different story. Byproducts are going to be produced throughout the year.”

Welchons said the biggest thing to remember with this is none of these feed ingredients are the primary reason that these sub-process or suppliers are in business.

“It’s a byproduct of what is making them their most money, what’s driving their bottom line,” he said. “So run rates in these instances are going to be more constant.”

Since corn harvest is in the fall, there’s normally higher prices that time of year along with lower prices in the summer when the spot market sees changes from old crop to new crop.

“Meanwhile, byproducts are produced throughout the year as companies make flour, oil, ethanol, all other primary products,” he said. “What is our feed demand? It’s going to vary throughout the year.”

Welchons said producers can typically get a pretty good value during the summer since storage is at a premium.

Another thing to think about with some of the byproducts is oftentimes they’re going to be high fiber, so non-ruminants can’t use these as easily.

“In periods such as during COVID where we had a lot of backups at slaughter houses we actually saw a lot of soy hulls started getting used in hog production and it was just to slow down rates of gain because they were so backed up,” he said. “Something like that comes in and increases demand.”

Also take note because of the cyclical nature of pricing on these ingredients, Welchons said some of the processors have looked at markets overseas, especially in certain areas.



Finding ways to maximize efficiency and minimize waste can help producers cut feed costs without impacting production goals for their herd. (Photo courtesy of Purina.)

Some have already built storage in the Middle East, Europe or other established market areas.

“At least probably during December they will expect to see any large changes versus what they’re projecting. And who knows about January through March. I imagine a lot of that will depend on if we don’t get rain soon through

the southern Plains. It might get a little bit worse. We won’t have any standing forage going into the winter.”

For more information about LNC visit <https://www.lnc-online.com/>.

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Cattle U producer panel discusses labor, input costs, wildfires and sustainability

By Lacey Vilhauer

One of the general sessions at the recent 2022 Cattle U & Trade Show included a beef producer panel made up of a diverse group of cattlemen from different backgrounds and geographic locations. The discussion—moderated by Dakota Ferguson, livestock marketing consultant with High Plains Journal—delved into such topics as labor, input costs, wildfires, and sustainability.

Panelists included Tom Jones, the managing member of Hy-Plains Feedyard, located near Montezuma, Kansas; Newley Hutchison, a fifth-generation rancher and great, great grandson of Oscar Chain of the Chain Ranch in Canton, Oklahoma; Scott Johnson, fourth-generation rancher and owner and chairman of Flying Diamond Ranch in Kit Carson, Colorado, and Phil Perry, owner at Perry Ranch in Oskaloosa, Kansas, and president of the Kansas Livestock Association.

When the subject of labor was brought up, the panelists provided input from their personal experiences of hiring and keeping employees. At Jones's 50,000-head feedyard, he tries to keep 1.25 employees minimum per 1,000 head of cattle but admits finding workers is challenging.

"From the management side to the labor side, it's tough to find people that want to get out of bed in the morning," Jones said. "We start at 5:30 in the morning and are working cattle by 6 a.m. You tell them they get one day a week off and one weekend a month, and they look at you like you're nuts."

Although he dislikes the open border policy implemented at the southern border, Jones expects some of those immigrants to contribute to the hourly labor pool at feedlots and other agricultural operations once their government assistance is discontinued. However, he stressed his concern for the next generation of managers.

"I'm deeply worried about our management people," he said. "There are not many who want to spend the time to understand that the 10 things that we're teaching you to do have to happen the same way every day for these cattle to perform. They can't get that through their heads and it really frustrates me."

Johnson and Hutchison both agreed the best way to keep employees around is to treat them like family. Hutchison provides a retirement plan for the 12 employees on staff at the Chain Ranch.

"We pay our top employees \$3,000 a month and provide them with housing, a pickup and half a beef each year," explained. "It figures up to be about \$60,000 a year, but they are on call all the time. These guys have to want to live this lifestyle."

But the employees at the Chain Ranch are not just cowboys, they have to be farmers too.

"We'll hook up and be on the tractors for 45 days planting crops," he said.

On the topic of sustainability, all of the panelists agreed farmers and ranchers have always been the champions of sustainability. Jones has gathered quite

a bit of data related to feedyards, greenhouse gas emissions and the carbon footprint of the beef industry. He said having the data in hand to communicate the beef industry's stance to consumers is so beneficial. Johnson, whose beef operation has won multiple regional and national conservation awards, stressed the importance of sustainability as well.

"Agriculture has a great sustainability story to tell," he said. "We concentrate on intensive grazing and we think there are a lot of sustainable benefits to that."

Perry agreed. He tries to rely on grass as much as possible on his operation.

"We have to take care of our land and the Earth that was given to us," Perry said. "We try to make the cow take care of herself as much as she can. God made the cow, but he didn't immediately make the hay baler or feed truck at the same time."

When the discussion turned to managing high input costs, Hutchison said he is always looking for ways to make his ranch more efficient. "In situations like this, I sit down and start looking at the books to see what's killing us," Hutchison said. When road fuel jumped from \$4,000 to \$15,000 a month, he bought two-wheel drive Toyota pickups instead of one-ton feed trucks.

However, there are some components these producers never cut corners on in their operations. For all of the panelists, vaccine and health programs for cattle are paramount and always add value. Hutchison said indemnity

See **Producer panel**, page 17

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Producer panel

Continued from page 16

and peace of mind are important to him.

“One thing I don’t think you can skimp on is insurance,” he said. “For wildfires, vehicles and equipment, that’s something that scares me. That’s not going to save you money on your day-to-day activity, but it may save your ranch in the long run.”

Hutchison also discussed his experiences with two wildfires he has been through and the changes he has made since. The Chain Ranch has its own fire truck to put out fires in the area because Hutchinson knows first-hand the damage they can cause. He said they practice cedar control, create fire breaks and disk fence lines along highways because many wildfires are ignited by chains sparking on roads, discarded cigarettes from motorists or jumping electric lines.

Having a strategy, whether it’s for a wildfire or an extended drought, was a theme that all the panelists stressed.

“With drought or wildfire, it’s better to have a plan and not need it rather than need one and not have it,” Johnson said.

With a combination of economic recession, high feed costs, and lack of forage due to the drought, producers should be considering the worst-case scenario when making decisions for their operations.

“Don’t wait to sell your cows when you have to sell your cows,” Perry said. “If you see it coming, start liquidating old cows and weaning calves. Don’t get yourself in a corner.”

Lacey Vilhauer can be reached at 620-227-1871 or lvilhauer@hpj.com.



The producer panelists included Tom Jones, the managing member of Hy-Plains Feedyard, located near Montezuma, Kansas; Newley Hutchison, a fifth-generation rancher and great, great grandson of Oscar Chain of the Chain Ranch in Canton, Oklahoma; Scott Johnson, fourth-generation rancher and owner and chairman of Flying Diamond Ranch in Kit Carson, Colorado and Phil Perry, owner at Perry Ranch in Oskaloosa, Kansas, and president of the Kansas Livestock Association. Dakota Ferguson, livestock marketing consultant with High Plains Journal moderated the panel. (Journal photo by Lacey Vilhauer.)

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Cut cattle feed costs; don't cut corners

Maximize efficiency and minimize waste to help cut feed costs without impacting production

Whether you're in an area suffering from drought or not, cattle feed cost is the single largest expense in the cow-calf sector, and prices are still on the rise. Although the future looks strong, with a recent CattleFax report predicting the gap between calf prices and cash cow costs to narrow in 2022, the current situation has producers asking, "Where can I cut?"

"Decisions made today can affect calf weaning weights this year, how quick a cow will rebreed and calve next year, and even the weight of her next year's calf," said N.T. Cosby, Ph.D., senior consulting nutritionist with Purina Animal Nutrition, Arden Hills, Minnesota. "Producers looking for cost savings should choose strategies to save money now, without losing advantage in strong markets later."

"Utilizing tactics to cut waste and inefficiencies when feeding cattle can have an impact on an operation's bottom line," Cosby said. "The goal is to cut costs without sacrificing performance."

Explore management strategies to help reduce cattle feed costs:

1. Maximize stored cattle feed

When cattle feed is not stored properly, it loses volume and nutritional value. Avoid shrink loss and packing issues by harvesting haylage and silage at the right



N.T. Cosby, Ph.D. (Courtesy photo.)

moisture level. Ensure proper fermentation by storing in an anaerobic environment and utilizing inoculants.

Inside storage for hay is ideal, but when not feasible, store on a surface that allows for drainage, such as gravel, tires or railroad ties, to keep the underside of bales dry. Proper spacing between bales allows air movement and improves drying when the weather does impact bales.

Be aware of storing timelines when feeding wet byproducts. Distillers' grains and gluten must be fed within four days in summer and within a week in winter.

2. Take advantage of grazing opportunities

In areas with available pastures, a strategic grazing program can help increase your operation's carrying capacity, extend grazing days and reduce dependence on harvested and stored feed.

Design a cattle grazing program to make the most of your available forages:

- Grazing programs can include strategic fencing, water placement, herding, pasture rotation and rest, forage species variation and more.
- Consider strip grazing crop aftermath, like corn stalks.
- Encourage cattle grazing in underutilized pasture by limiting them to certain pasture sections and slowly adding and removing sections over time.
- Supplements such as blocks, protein tubs or liquid supplements can promote cattle grazing in underutilized pasture or range areas, potentially increasing grazing days.

3. Monitor mineral intake

"A well-balanced mineral supplement is the cornerstone of a nutrition program that can impact reproduction, health, longevity, soundness and efficient energy utilization," Cosby emphasized.

The biggest factor affecting mineral cost is consistent intake.

"If a mineral isn't being consumed, the rancher has paid for something that is giving no return," says Cosby. "If the mineral is over-consumed, the cost per day may exceed the value returned."

Monitor mineral intake and adjust the number of mineral feeders and the location of feeding stations to achieve your goal consumption rate.

4. Avoid hay waste

According to the University of Nebraska, feeding hay to cattle with 24-hour free-choice access can result in 25 to 45% hay waste due to sorting, trampling on and soiling the hay. Feeding hay in smaller amounts and in well-drained areas can reduce waste. Also, research the most efficient hay rings or utilize "hay traps" that reduce access time. Operations in drier climates or range settings may consider unrolling hay or processed forages.

"The cow-calf business is more of a marathon than a sprint," Cosby said. "Cutting extra input costs from waste and inefficiency can allow you to make your feed dollars work harder now and keep your operation on track for long-term goals."

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