

Prepare your animals for the feedlot

Feedlotting is a popular topic at farmer's days and other agricultural gatherings. The focus of these discussions are mainly the measures taken by a producer to produce the right animals for the feedlot, how these animals are handled and the factors to take into account when determining the price.



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Roelie van Reenen of the Beefmaster feedlot near Christiana believes there will never be a right or wrong answer to any of these issues. “There is no right or wrong animal. The question should rather be: How does the ideal animal look for the particular feedlot the producer is supplying to? Each feedlot has different needs. Breed, weight, gender and numerous other factors can all influence the price – not only the price the feedlot is prepared to pay but also the price the market is prepared to compete against.”

Many aspects should be taken into account by the producer, feedlot and market. Everyone wants to make as much profit as possible.

The growth curve

Van Reenen says the time when the animal goes from the farm to the feedlot, is important to both the producer and feedlot.

“The feedlot industry often refers to the animal’s growth curve, with the producer and the feedlot wanting to gain maximum

genetic potential from each animal with the help of each one's management activities and other aids. This is the common denominator for both feedlot and producer. If they cooperate, it can benefit both.

"The seller decides for himself at which stage of the growth curve he wants to take the animal to the feedlot, but the feedlot decides what it is going to pay. From feedlot's point of view, it wants to control the greatest portion of the animal's growth curve to rear it in such a way, that it is more acceptable to the market.

"The producer, on the other hand, wants to keep the largest portion of the growth curve under his control, because the heavier the animal that he sends to the feedlot, the more money he is likely to make."

"This is exactly where the producer and the feedlot should rather cooperate for mutual benefit from the transaction. Feedlots tend to pay more per kilogramme for lighter and younger animals than for mature animals, as in the case of mature animals a smaller (and more expensive) portion of the total growth curve remains for manipulation and utilisation," he explains.

Optimal price

According to Van Reenen, the right feedlot calf comes at a cost from the producer's side, but the market is prepared to pay for it. "Determine the needs of your market and produce accordingly. This means cooperating with the feedlot to optimise your selling price. "This does not necessarily equate to the highest price. The optimal price is linked to quality, production potential and production cost."

The feedlot wants to buy healthy animals with good potential. From the feedlot's point of view, value addition is mass and grade (fatness). The more weight the animal can put on in the feedlot, the better.

Classification and pricing

The same applies to classification and pricing. Animals that have shed teeth, usually fetch lower prices. This means that animals that have not yet shed their teeth are preferred for slaughter.

The physical appearance and health condition of the animal also plays a major role. Any disease condition has a negative effect on the growth curve and increases the feedlot's production costs. Disease treatment further affects costs.

The same applies to the appearance of the animal. A damaged hide, for instance, results in lower income. Horned animals can cause damage to hides and can injure other animals at the feed or water trough.

Stress in animals

Apart from the fact that animals must be in good condition, the stress that animals undergo upon arrival at the feedlot also plays a major role.

Van Reenen says producers usually prefer to take their weaner calves to the feedlot directly after weaning, so as to avoid having to bear the weight loss associated with the weaning period. "Over the long-term, this actually harms the producer, as feedlots compensate for this in the price they are prepared to pay."

Weaning is a necessary, but difficult management practice. Calf transport, as well as removal to an unfamiliar feedlot environment and having to mix with other animals, are all negative factors that should be taken into account.

Biological processes

In Van Reenen's view, the ideal is not to transport weaner calves before a minimum age of 21 days. "The less the stress experienced during the process, the better. Biological processes such as adjusting to a new environment, coping with a

new nutritional environment, quarantine and immune reaction after immunisation, usually end after 21 days. Hence, it is necessary to give the calves three weeks chance to recover from these shocks before they are transported.”

The effect of stress will certainly affect the producer’s pocket and can be measured against the price per kilogramme he receives from the feedlot. If the seller and buyer cooperate to obtain optimum growth in producing the final product, it creates an opportunity from which both can benefit.

The goal of each feedlot is to produce high-quality meat. Actions and practices that cause stress, should, therefore, be avoided. Stress before and during slaughter can also have negative effects, such as a short shelf life, tough meat and a high pH.

Quality of meat

One of the aspects that are often under discussion with regard to meat quality, is the use of growth stimulants.

According to Van Reenen, feedlots will welcome the use of stimulants in the rounding off phase, provided that it is done in cooperation with the feedlot. “Certain stimulants complement each other in the animal’s production cycle, something which both producer and feedlot can benefit from. However, if the wrong programme is followed, it can harm the feedlot, as the effect of the stimulant will wear off.

“Growth stimulants promote production process or growth curves and present various advantages such as cost-effectiveness or production costs, a smaller carbon footprint and less water required per kilogramme product produced.

“A lot of advice is available regarding the profile of the ideal animal for the feedlot and how producers can ensure the best price for their animals, but the most important is cooperating with the feedlot and sharing the same goals.”

Van Reenen says he learned from experience that the producer who builds himself a name by producing calves with high potential, will usually benefit. “It is just like building your own brand. There is commodity value behind a brand, which is reflected in the price that is paid.” – *Koos du Pisanie, Stockfarm*

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