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LOT FEEDING OF BEEF CATTLE

4. CATTLE FOR FEED LOTS

By W. J. WILKIE, B.V.Sc., Senior Animal Husbandry Adviser

BREED, age, condition, health, temperament and sex are all important in feed lot cattle.

Breed

Breed is the subject of much argument. Enthusiasts will argue in favour of their own breed, but in fact there is a greater difference between strains within the major breeds than there is between the breeds.

Some breeds of cattle are seldom considered for feed lot fattening. The Channel Island breeds are poor converters of feed to flesh and in many cases kill out with an undesirable yellow fat. Other milking breeds have recently shown that if bull calves are put to full feed from birth, they are good food converters and make excellent veal. However, if such calves are allowed to go through a store period, they tend to develop the long limbs, long flat ribs and shallow fleshing of the dairy beast.

The recognised beef breeds, on the other hand, can go through a store period and still retain the ability to produce a desirable deep-fleshed carcass.
Experience with cattle from various sources will be needed to show which breeders are producing cattle which will grow well in feedlots. Cattle, which look alike on inspection may behave quite differently under lot feeding.

"Breeding" in feedlot cattle means the inherited ability to grow economically, and to produce a good carcass in these conditions.

Age
Age will influence the type of ration needed. Young cattle grow as fast as older ones and have greater economy of feed used but need better feed. They are more susceptible to some diseases and to digestive upsets.

Older cattle can handle more roughage but need more total feed. They also tend to lay on fat and produce less desirable carcasses.

Cattle finished between 15 and 20 months, have been bringing high prices per 100 lb. and this age group makes good feeder cattle.

Condition
Condition must be carefully judged in feeder cattle. What is wanted for most economic use of feed is a strong big-framed but not fat animal. Eight to 12 month old steers from the Northern Territory and Queensland pastoral areas are ideal and have done well in feedlot trials in Victoria and South Australia.

Health
Good health is vital in cattle that have to be put into close contact with others. A wise precaution is to know the general state of health of the farm or station the cattle come from. A later section will deal with diseases that are important in feedlots. A good general rule is "don't buy cattle unseen" unless you know the vendor, and don't let cattle that are suspect mix with the others on the lot. Every feedlot should have a reception area where new cattle can be observed for a few days, and a few isolation pens, where suspect cattle, or those that become sick, can be kept.

Most large American feedlots have hospital facilities and many employ their own veterinary staff.

With the introduction of T.B. testing for beef cattle, it should be possible to obtain animals free from that disease, which can lead to the loss, not only of the animal that introduces it, but also of other contacted animals.

Temperament
Feedlot cattle should be docile by nature. Many station bred cattle are a little touchy when first brought in, but by careful handling during the first few days practically all of these become quiet and contented.

Nervous animals are a nuisance in the feedlot. They do not do well themselves and upset the animals with them. Badly
handled and frightened animals should be bought at a discount, if at all. It will cost time and feed to bring them to a condition of placidity.

"Nuisance" animals cannot always be picked at first inspection, but careful examination during the preliminary days on feed should make them obvious; all shy feeders, nervy or touchy animals should be culled. Bullies can sometimes be cured by putting them with bigger animals.

By the end of a fortnight all the cattle should be settled down. If they are still restless, there is probably something wrong with the cattle, or with the feed, water or management.

Sex

Heifers can be handled in feed lots. They grow quite well, but lay on fat quicker than do bulls or steers. For this reason heifers should be marketed at lighter weights than steers. Heifers must always be fattened as a separate group.

Speying heifers will prevent the nuisance that animals in season cause, but the set-back due to the operation, and the occasional fatalities, makes this uneconomical. If speyed heifers can be purchased, they can be handled quite well in the feed lot.

Butchers in Australia tend to pay less per 100 lb. for heifers. There is no good reason for this if the heifers are not too fat.

Cows are a losing proposition in a feed lot. They eat a lot, lay on fat instead of meat, and bring poor prices that do not justify the feed.

Young bulls do well on feed, but must be young, as they become dangerous. They do not have as well balanced a carcass as steers, but usually have a higher percentage of lean meat. There is a traditional prejudice against bull meat in Australia which counts against bulls, but the greatest difficulty would be in continuity of supply of uniform stock.

Steers are the ideal animals for feed lots. They are quiet, grow economically without fuss and into good commercial meat. It is possible to obtain lines of steers and if feed lots develop, the production of suitable lines of young feeder steers will be an essential part of the industry. This may be done many miles from the feed lot. Indeed, one of the great advantages that will follow the final eradication of contagious bovine pleuro-pneumonia from our northern areas will be that young cattle will become available for fattening in the south.

Horns

Horns are a disadvantage in a feed lot. Cattle with horns are more likely to disturb or injure others, and may cause visible damage which will affect sale prices. Naturally, polled or dehorned cattle need less yard space, and less room at the feed or water trough.
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