

Pasture to Packer



PHOTO BY TODD ADAMS

Texas 4-H program teaches youth real-world cattle-feeding process.

by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

You can't learn everything from books. Some things you just have to learn through doing, through succeeding and failing on your own. Many people would say that feeding cattle successfully is one of those things. A program in northern Texas is teaching 4-H members the ropes in feeding cattle, but alleviating some of the risk through education and practical experience.

The Erath County 4-H Pasture to Packer program is a program like no other. It puts its participants through the real-life application of feeding cattle.

"Our goal was to create a true program from start to finish that incorporates everything a producer deals with, from the

► **Above:** The Pasture to Packer program taught participants about permanent ID through use of its specially designed and registered brand.

financial side to selecting and feeding the cattle to the marketing process," explains Whit Weems, agriculture and natural resources extension agent for Erath County, Texas, and program creator.

In its second year, the program is growing in interest and support. The first year attracted 11 participants; the second, 13. Weems says there is a great deal of interest again for next year, and for good reason.

Real-world experience

Program participants, who can be between the ages of 9 and 18, learn the whole gamut of cattle feeding. They begin by applying for the program with an essay and an interview with the program committee. Weems notes this is mostly to explain the expectations of the program and stress that the program will require time and effort, and to find out what



the participants want to learn most from the program.

"We want to help these kids grow, and we also need to see if their commitment level is high enough," he emphasizes.

The program starts with the youth applying for a loan with LoneStar Ag Credit. The participants have to go into the loan application interview with a plan to handle expenses and revenue. Brady Chandler, Pasture to Packer Committee member and manager of Box W Ranch in Lipan, Texas, says the participants are responsible for marketing the meat and need to have a plan for paying back the loan ahead of time.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 52

Pasture to Packer CONTINUED FROM PAGE 50

Chandler elaborates that the banker is a member of the Pasture to Packer Committee, and they help educate the youth about how to talk to a banker and what bankers are looking for in loan applications.

Allissa Adams, a junior participant from Stephenville, Texas, says there is a lot of education in the Pasture to Packer program, but your own research is required to prepare for the loan interview. Her family has a small commercial herd, so she had some background knowledge. She says she looked at hay costs from August to September, called feed stores about pricing and figured out how much feed she would need for the duration of the program.

"It was a little bit scary not knowing what we were getting into for the loan application, but when I have a herd of my own later in life, I'll know what to expect now," says the forward-thinking eighth grader.

After the loans are approved, the youth select a steer to buy with their loan money. Weems explains that the committee procures the cattle. This past year, Chandler sold six steers from Box W Ranch, and seven steers were bought from another nearby operation, Evans Farm. The youth draw numbers to determine the order in which they select the steers.

Chandler adds that the youth get some information about the calves' background and their weights. The calves were all sired by artificial insemination (AI) bulls.

Before the selection, the program has a live cattle evaluation workshop, and the young participants select their steers on visual appraisal, much like an auction market. Once the steers are selected, then the group learns to process them. They learned about Beef Quality Assurance (BQA), animal handling, DNA testing and ultrasound scanning, explains Chandler. They pulled blood for GeneMax™ (GMX) Focus testing to test for gain and grade potential.

"As profit margins get smaller, it is important to use tools that can maximize profit opportunities," Weems notes. "Even if these kids don't have Angus later, using these kinds of technologies is an important learning step to understand based on the industry."



PHOTO BY TODD ADAMS

► Allissa Adams fed her steer at home and kept regular records of his feed and gain.

They vaccinate and freeze-brand their cattle with a specially designed and registered brand for the program, Weems adds. "We wanted to teach them about permanent ID."

During the feeding process, about 150-180 days, the young cattlemen feed their steer at home however they want, though the program provides some guidelines, says Chandler. They keep a recordbook throughout the process.

Weems notes that during the feeding process, there are many educational programs with guest speakers scattered throughout. Through the help of sponsors, the youth get to attend an out-of-state trip to Cattle Empire LLC, a five-feedyard organization with a one-time capacity of 229,000-head in Haskell county in southwest Kansas; Gardiner Angus Ranch in Ashland, Kan.; and Redlands Community College in El Reno, Okla.

"This trip was to give the kids some industry perspective. They learned about genetics, feeding and career options," Weems explains.

Seeing their results

A big benefit of this program is the partnership with the meats lab at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas, emphasizes Weems. They are able to harvest the calves on the rail, so the youth get to see the carcasses instead of simply reading the cut sheet. They spend half the day in the cooler and go through every carcass.

First they bring all the calves together to see how all of the steers finished. A week and a half later, they can compare the live traits with how they did on the rail.

"This really completes the program, they really get to see the data instead of just talking about it. It truly teaches them how to look at the phenotype of the calf and how they finished out on the hoof, and then see what happens when the hide comes off," Weems emphasizes.

"They see how different traits affect the carcass. They see why things are important. Why do we feed for a certain thickness? Why do we feed a certain frame-size calf? Why do we want to shoot for a certain muscle score? Then they get to come in and see the calves on the rail, and you can see that it starts clicking and making sense," he adds.

The participants had to put together their own marketing plan for their steers to pay back the loan. Weems explains that there were a large variety of creative marketing options chosen, from sold on live weight, on the rail or custom cuts in baskets. The kids had the responsibility to pick up the meat and deliver it to their customers.



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PHOTO BY ALLISON BALLINGER, CROSS B PHOTOGRAPHY

“We saw a lot of marketing options. The kids really worked to bring the most return on their investment,” Weems recalls.

To wrap up the program, participants complete a final essay and submit their recordbooks. They have a final awards program to honor their accomplishments in both the junior and senior divisions.

Weems adds that just from one year to the second, there was vast improvement among the participants of both years. The youth are really using what they learned from the first year.

The benefits

Adams says, “The best part of this program for me was watching my steer grow, and looking back and seeing what I started with compared to what I finished with.”

She says there is a lot of work in this program, but it is worth it. She fed and watered her steer every day, broke ice when needed, and kept records of his feed intake every day and his weight. She recommends the program because, “Even if you’re not going into the industry later, it helps with responsibility. You learn how to apply for a loan and how to work hard, which is helpful any time in life.”

Her father, Todd Adams, adds that the program even helped her with her schoolwork.

“Her math work improved,” he explains. “They were going over ratios in school, and this really helped.”

Will Pettit, a second-year participant, says, “Although I thought I already knew a great deal from showing cattle for several years, I realized there was a lot more to a commercial steer project when compared to a show program.”

Through the live evaluation course the past two years, Pettit says, “I was able to refine my ability to grade cattle for carcass merits on the hoof. I compared the live evaluation of my steer with what the carcass actually graded, and I was 0.5 off his yield grade, and I graded his quality very accurately.”

The small numbers of the program allow for great interaction and networking with teachers, mentors and the other participants. Adams says those in the senior division helped the juniors a good deal.

“This program might be a competition, but the other kids that you compete against become some of your best friends,” Pettit adds.

The networking didn’t stop at friendships

between participants. Second-year participant Aidan Delaney, having selected a steer sired by Connealy Confidence, reached out to the Connealy family after doing some research on his steer’s sire. Delaney says the Connealys have been very supportive of him and have been a good source of information.

This program has seen success, Weems says, because the community has been behind it 150%, from donations and partnerships to educational partners.

“Our biggest thing with these kids is that they see the whole picture. It’s not just feedyard, it’s not just cow-calf, not just purebred and not just stocker; it’s the whole picture. It takes everybody to make the full circle, and we’re trying to expose these kids to as much of that as we can,” Chandler concludes.

“Producers in our area are getting older; there aren’t many young guys coming in. This program gives those kids with an interest in agriculture a real-world experience. Even if they don’t go into production agriculture, these kids can explain where food comes from and explain producing a product.”

