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2006 BIF Annual Meeting and Research Symposium



21ST CENTURY GENETICS: RISING TO THE CHALLENGE SOUTHERN STYLE

A Cattle Feeder's Perspective

by Troy Smith



Those who work at their genetics, manage their cattle well, and link up with feedyards who can help them capture value-added premiums can realistically garner \$50 to \$80 per head over the commodity cattle market," said Tom Brink of Five Rivers Ranch.

CHOCTAW, MISS. (April 19, 2006) — During Tuesday's general session of the 2006 Beef Improvement Federation meeting, cattle feeder Tom Brink offered his company's strategy for satisfying the modern beef consumer. Brink is a senior vice president of Five Rivers Ranch, the largest cattle-feeding company in the world.

Formed by merging the cattle feeding interests of ContiGroup and Smithfield Foods, Five Rivers Ranch operates 10 feedyards in Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas and Idaho. The lots have a combined one-time capacity of 811,000 head.

Five Rivers Ranch still adheres to some commodity principles, including competitive procurement of cattle and corn, efficient operation and effective risk management, Brink said. However, company strategy involves segmenting cattle inventory and managing those segments to attain grid-marketing premiums, including premiums associated with a variety of branded beef programs.

Address health issues

To satisfy the 21st Century consumer while maintaining production efficiency, Brink said, the industry must address some major issues. Foremost, is the health and immune status of cattle entering feedyards.

Brink said the trend toward greater application of vaccination and preconditioning programs are helping, but feedyards still receive far too many cattle with naive immune systems.

"Cattle that get sick don't make money for the feeder, and they produce inferior product," Brink said, noting how sickness hinders feedlot performance and negatively affects the quality of the

end product. The impact on meat quality makes it more than a production matter. It's a consumer issue, too.

"It's an education problem," he added. "Not enough producers are utilizing the technology that's available to fix it."

Genetic design

According to Brink, another problem exists in the fact that huge numbers of cattle are designed wrong genetically. He says cattle feeders have skirted this issue for too long, afraid of offending cow-calf producers. While many cattle producers don't want to admit it, problems with breed composition are costing the industry a lot of money.

Five Rivers Ranch favors a genetic combination of 50%-75% Angus (black or red) and 25%-50% Continental breeding. That combination, Brink said, offers a good performance, good red meat yield and desirable quality grade.

He acknowledged the advantage of heat-tolerant, *Bos indicus* genetics in the southern climate, but warned against more than a 25% contribution in feeder cattle. Brink blamed chronically low percentages of Choice and Prime carcasses in Texas and Kansas packing plants on cattle with too much "ear."

Brink advised Southern producers to add Angus influence to their herds' genetics to increase quality grade.

He urged cow-calf producers to embrace individual animal identification and implement age-, source- and process-verification protocols that facilitate participation in value-added marketing programs. The foundation of nearly all of these programs is a complete, verifiable set of information on each calf crop, he explained.

"If we, as beef producers, are going to