

BUILT ON SERVICE, DRIVEN BY DATA

Pratt Feeders Group combines value-based marketing, technology and customer service to help producers capture more from every animal.

Tens of thousands of cattle dot the High Plains landscape at Pratt Feeders in Pratt, Kansas. Long before cattle filled these pens, B-29 bombers moved across the same stretch of ground, serving the Pratt Army Airfield during World War II. More than eight decades later, the former base's V-shaped runway and taxiway layout still remains devoted to service, but with a different mission: helping cattle producers feed a nation.

Leading that work is Tom Fanning, a former infantry captain whose path from military service to general manager brings the story of the property full circle.

"To me, the cattle business is the great American entrepreneurial enterprise," he says. "It's patriotism, it's freedom. It's being able to work with your hands and be

involved in something real that you can touch and feel. It's also serving a greater good by providing food to a nation."

Fanning became general manager of Pratt Feeders Group in 2024 after managing its Buffalo, Oklahoma, location for 24 years. Today, the primarily custom-feeding operation includes four yards: Pratt Feeders in Pratt, Kansas; Buffalo Feeders in Buffalo, Oklahoma; Ashland Feeders in Ashland, Kansas; and Ford County Feeders near Ford, Kansas.

The yards have a combined one-time capacity of approximately 141,000 head, including 40,000 at Pratt, 52,000 at Ford County, 32,000 at Buffalo and 17,500 at Ashland. Fanning said the yards are full most



Tom Fanning



Tom Fanning serves as the General Manager of the Pratt Feeders Group. He previously managed Buffalo Feeders for 24 years, building a reputation for operational excellence, performance-driven cattle feeding and strong customer relationships.

Tom earned a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Economics from Oklahoma State University in 1987. He served as an Infantry Captain in the U.S. Army from 1982-1992 and later completed a Master of Science in Management from Troy State University in 1992. From 1992-2001, he managed cattle Texas Panhandle feeding operations for Cargill.

Tom has served as the Oklahoma Beef Council Chairman and as a Texas Cattle Feeders Association Director.

Under his leadership, Buffalo Feeders was honored with the 2009 Certified Angus Beef Feedyard of the Year, the 2019 National Cattlemen's Beef Association Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) Feedyard of the Year, and the 2023 Texas Cattle Feeders Association Feedyard Excellence in BQA.

Tom and his wife of 36 years, Michele, have three children and four grandchildren. Together, they operate a cow-calf, stocker, and feeder cattle business, reflecting their multi-generational commitment to the cattle industry.

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of the time, with customer-owned cattle accounting for approximately 50% to 85% of occupancy.

Each location is also within a relatively tight freight zone of National Beef's Dodge City and Liberal plants. Fanning describes that proximity as "a competitive advantage for cattle harvested on a grid with dressing percentage being a very important part of that and reducing shrink."

That location supports the group's broader purpose: connecting cattle producers with the packing sector and helping them capture more value.

"Our job is to serve our customers and to add value to their cattle operation," he says. "One of the ways that we've been able to do that is by being a link between the cow-calf or the stocker operator and the packer. U.S. Premium Beef has been that link for us."

Strong Signals

Pratt Feeders was part of U.S. Premium Beef from its beginning in 1997. Fanning says the value-based system gave producers an avenue to capture the value of genetics and cattle quality that often went unrecognized when cattle were sold on the cash market.

For Pratt Feeders, the grid is more than a pricing method. It communicates what the marketplace rewards and discounts, sending signals back through the feedyard and stocker sectors to the cow-calf producer. As grid incentives change, Pratt Feeders helps customers understand the results and adjust management, marketing and genetic decisions accordingly.

One of the greatest lessons to glean from data over the years, Fanning says, has been the amount of variation within a calf crop. He cites instances when customers believe they are sending a uniform group, only to discover a 450-pound difference between the largest and smallest animals. After another 100 days on feed, that spread reaches 650 to 700 pounds. Grid results can then reveal as much as a \$1,000-per-head difference between the top and bottom-performing animals.

Addressing that variation comes down to a system of statistics, narrowing weight differences and identifying the best marketing time for each group. Heavier, faster-growing cattle can be marketed before facing overweight discounts, while lighter cattle receive the additional days needed to reach a more profitable endpoint.

“We’re in a really unique time where the cattle market is so high and our cost of gain is relatively low,” Fanning says. “So that margin, that gap is really large, and it’s one of the reasons that heavier weight carcasses have had such an impact on your bottom line.”

Pratt Feeders also helps customers manage price risk so they can focus on factors within their control, including feed conversion, average daily gain, carcass weight and quality grade. DNA testing adds to that equation by providing an early look at an animal’s potential for gain and grade, helping determine how to capture the greatest available margin.

“Having that risk management tool lets the customer sleep great at night when there’s all of these geopolitical black swan events happening across the world,” he says.

Those tools are increasingly important amid historically tight cattle supplies. Fanning points to drought, limited herd rebuilding, heifer retention and disruptions at the southern border as pressures affecting feedyards and packers. High calf prices also limit how far stocker operators’ capital goes when purchasing cattle for summer grass.

“The reverse of the high cost of those calves is everything we do at the feedyard becomes much more important, because we have to capture every available dollar of added value from that animal,” Fanning says. “We think U.S. Premium Beef is one of the best ways to do that in our industry. It’s helped us help our customers improve what they do and add value to their product.”

Data to Dollars

Data plays a central role in how Pratt Feeders evaluates cattle and makes management decisions. Fanning says technology does not replace the judgment of experienced cattlemen; instead, it provides another tool to strengthen their confidence and help them make more informed decisions.

That approach is especially relevant as another generation enters the cattle business. While experienced producers may have traditionally relied on visual appraisal and years of observation, individual weights, carcass results and other performance measures translate that knowledge into a more objective and repeatable process. Fanning says younger producers are particularly interested in examining how each animal performs and contributes to the value of the group.

Even as technology advances, some priorities remain timeless. Strong health, nutrition and backgrounding programs prepare cattle for the stress of transportation and entering a new environment, Fanning says. “Over my career, the most disappointing closeouts always have to do with health failures,” he reflects.

Those fundamentals remain the foundation, but future success will depend on how effectively feedyards build upon them. Fanning believes competitive feedyards must consider much more than a competitive cost of gain. Genetics and projected animal performance must be layered with market conditions, anticipated harvest dates, basis, weather and feed costs. DNA testing and forecasting tools can then help identify an animal’s optimum endpoint and show what value may be captured or lost by marketing on different dates.

At the same time, genetic progress must continue to emphasize the whole animal rather than a single trait, balancing feedyard and carcass performance with soundness, maternal ability and adaptability. “You can sort your cowherd based on those grid results,” he says. “If we do that consistently, we can begin culling the bottom 20% and replacing them with cattle that consistently perform in the top 20%.”

Looking ahead, Fanning expects Pratt Feeders to continue serving as a voice for customers across the U.S. and as their marketing hub. And with its location in the heart of cattle and corn country, the group is positioned to continue the relationship-focused work it has carried out for more than four decades. Central to those plans is maintaining a relationship with USPB.

“We’re proud to be part of the U.S. Premium Beef family,” he says. “It’s been a great experience for us all the way around. They understand what needs to happen and win and really help us take care of the customer.” ♦

