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Faster feedlot growth without losing control

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This issue explains why faster feedlot growth depends on controlling energy, rumen health, intake, and dietary transitions rather than merely supplying more nutrients.

When finished cattle prices are strong, additional saleable gain becomes more valuable. Faster growth can mean reaching the same finishing endpoint sooner; feeding to a heavier weight is a separate decision. Both require attention to feed conversion, days on feed, cost of gain, and carcass value. Pushing cattle too aggressively can disrupt intake, increase digestive problems, and erase the advantage that a higher-energy program was intended to create. Greater nutrient density is useful only while cattle remain healthy, consume feed consistently, and convert the additional supply into saleable gain. This is where applied nutrition and disciplined feedlot management matter most.

The objective is not merely to formulate a more concentrated diet. It is to align carbohydrate fermentability, effective fiber, protein supply, supplemental fat, and feeding management so cattle can express more of their growth potential. Each element affects the value of the others, and a weakness in one area can limit the response to improvements elsewhere. A diet that supports faster gain on paper may disappoint if feed delivery or water access limits intake. The following six areas are the ones I examine first when working with feedlots seeking faster, more dependable performance.

Balance the carbohydrate profile

Energy drives growth, but simply adding more grain is not always the answer. Grain type, processing, starch fermentability, byproducts, roughage level, and particle size determine how rapidly carbohydrates are fermented. A formula may contain adequate fiber yet lack enough physical stimulation for normal rumination. The objective is sufficient fermentable energy with enough effective roughage to stabilize intake and rumen conditions. More starch helps only while cattle remain healthy and consistently on feed.

Match protein to available energy

Crude protein does not fully describe how protein functions. Rumen-degradable protein supplies nitrogen for microbial growth alongside available fermentable energy. Digestible microbial protein and digestible rumen-undegradable feed protein together supply metabolizable protein to the animal. The diet must support rumen microbes and meet the animal's requirements for absorbed amino acids. I have seen many formulas supply more protein than cattle could use economically; the animals performed, but excess nitrogen added cost without a proportional response. The objective is the appropriate amount and type of protein for the cattle, diet, growth stage, and expected performance.

Use additives for defined purposes

Ionophores have an extensive evidence base for improving feedlot efficiency where their use is permitted. Responses to yeast products, other direct-fed microbials, and buffers require closer attention to the particular product, diet, and intended outcome. Every additive needs a defined purpose and supporting evidence from comparable feeding conditions. Neither a plausible mechanism nor combining several products establishes an economic benefit. Additives can support a sound program, but they cannot substitute for formulation and management.

Select fats with the rumen in mind

Supplemental fat can raise dietary energy without adding more starch, but fat sources do not behave equally in the rumen. Excessive fat, particularly from sources rich in unsaturated fatty acids, can inhibit fiber-digesting microorganisms and reduce fiber utilization. Tallow, oilseeds, protected products, and fats already present in byproducts can all contribute useful energy when their characteristics and total dietary inclusion are understood. The correct decision depends on the complete ration, not the description attached to one ingredient.

Watch how cattle eat

Some of the most useful information comes from watching cattle at the bunk. Competition, sorting, large, irregular meals, residual feed, and delayed attendance can reveal trouble before performance deteriorates visibly. Nutrition is not only what formulation software predicts; it is what cattle actually consume. For this reason, I make it a point to walk the pens whenever I visit a feedlot, spend time among the cattle, and observe them around feeding time rather than relying only on ration sheets and performance records. I also examine behavior, rumen fill, manure consistency, and pen uniformity. Changes in intake should prompt checks of feed delivery, water access, and ration consistency.

Respect every transition

Receiving, adaptation, and each increase in dietary concentrate are periods of elevated risk. Rumen microorganisms and the rumen epithelium need time to adjust as carbohydrate supply changes. Moving too rapidly toward the finishing diet may shorten the schedule, but unstable intake and digestive disturbances can impair later performance. There is no universal step-up program: grain processing, roughage source, cattle background, previous diet, health status, and bunk management all matter. Advance when cattle are ready for the next diet, using intake patterns and health observations alongside the planned schedule. An intake setback calls for investigation before the next increase in concentrate.

In Brief, faster growth is worthwhile when it improves the economics of finishing cattle. A successful program supplies usable nutrients while maintaining rumen function, consistent intake, and appropriate adaptation. Judge the result through feed conversion, days on feed, cost of gain, and carcass value. Strong cattle prices can reward better performance, but they do not make every additional input profitable.

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