

# Beef Day 2021

## Virtual Feedlot Shortcourse: When life hands out lemons

*Warren Rusche*

### Objective

The COVID-19 pandemic forced changes in how Extension programming was delivered in 2020. Web-based distance learning tools were used to deliver educational material when it was impractical to use traditional delivery methods.

### Study Description

The SDSU Extension Feedlot Shortcourse has traditionally been an in-person event with as much opportunity for hands-on learning and demonstrations as possible. The program is offered over a two-day period in August at the SDSU Cow-Calf Education and Research Facility with approximately 30 participants each year, on average. The program addresses feed delivery and mixing, animal health, production technologies, and risk management.

However, the events of 2020 turned that plan on its head. It was clear by early summer that holding in-person events would be challenging at best, with the very real risk of being forced to cancel or postpone because of changing conditions surrounding COVID-19. For that reason, we elected to offer the Feedlot Shortcourse as a virtual program using the Zoom platform.

The first challenge was to attempt to replicate the program without being face-to-face. We selected seven topics that were relevant to successful backgrounding or cattle finishing enterprises that could be taught effectively on a virtual platform. Those topics and presenters were as follows in alphabetical order by topic:

- Backgrounding Systems – Dr. Alfredo DiCostanzo, University of Minnesota Beef Specialist
- Bunk Management – Warren Rusche, SDSU Extension Beef Feedlot Management Associate
- Cattle Feeding Risk Management – Dr. Matt Dierson, SDSU Extension Risk Management Specialist
- Facility Management – Dr. Erik Loe, Midwest PMS
- Feedlot Cattle Health Strategies – Dr. Russ Daly, SDSU Extension Veterinarian
- Growth Enhancing Technologies – Dr. Zach Smith, SDSU Feedlot Researcher
- Wrap-up Panel Discussion

The webinar series was held on seven consecutive Thursdays in July and August at 12:30 CDT for approximately one hour. Each session was recorded so that participants could watch at their convenience if they were unable to log on for the live sessions or wished to view the program again. Participation in the program greatly exceeded expectations. There were 275 registered participants from 25 states plus Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Australia, and South Africa.



## Lessons Learned

Being forced to try alternative delivery methods allow us to examine the new procedures and see what aspects should be retained for use in the future. One of the major differences between a virtual and in-person platform is the opportunity to reach a much broader audience. We were surprised to see as much interest as we did from outside our region, especially considering that we did not use paid advertising. It was gratifying to see interest in our programs and research from outside our backyard. We also learned that as long as the program was recorded, the time of day was of little importance.

We were also able to use the recording to overcome language barriers to serve audiences that otherwise are more challenging to reach. One of the sponsors of this program asked if we could offer Spanish language transcriptions for the recorded videos. We were able to accomplish that task, and consequently offer educational materials to a Hispanic audience without needing to find qualified translators in real-time.

On the other hand, it became clear that a seven-week virtual webinar series was too long. Evidence for this conclusion can be found in Figure 1 showing numbers of viewers for both the live and recorded sessions. Total participation declined with each passing week. We cannot definitively say whether or not this response is due to competing events or work tasks or a case of “Zoom fatigue”, but it does lead us to suspect that less may be more in terms of how many weeks we ask participants to log on to the program. We would not have lost as much of our audience using in-person delivery methods.

In the future we expect that a hybrid approach might prove to be most effective overall. Virtual program offers less opportunity for dialogue and idea sharing, but offers the ability to reach a much wider audience with little additional investment. Future Feedlot Shortcourses will likely feature some segments that will be offered virtually to enhance our reach, but paired with in-person programming to expand upon previously presented material and to focus on topics where the hands-on component is more critical.

## Take Home Points

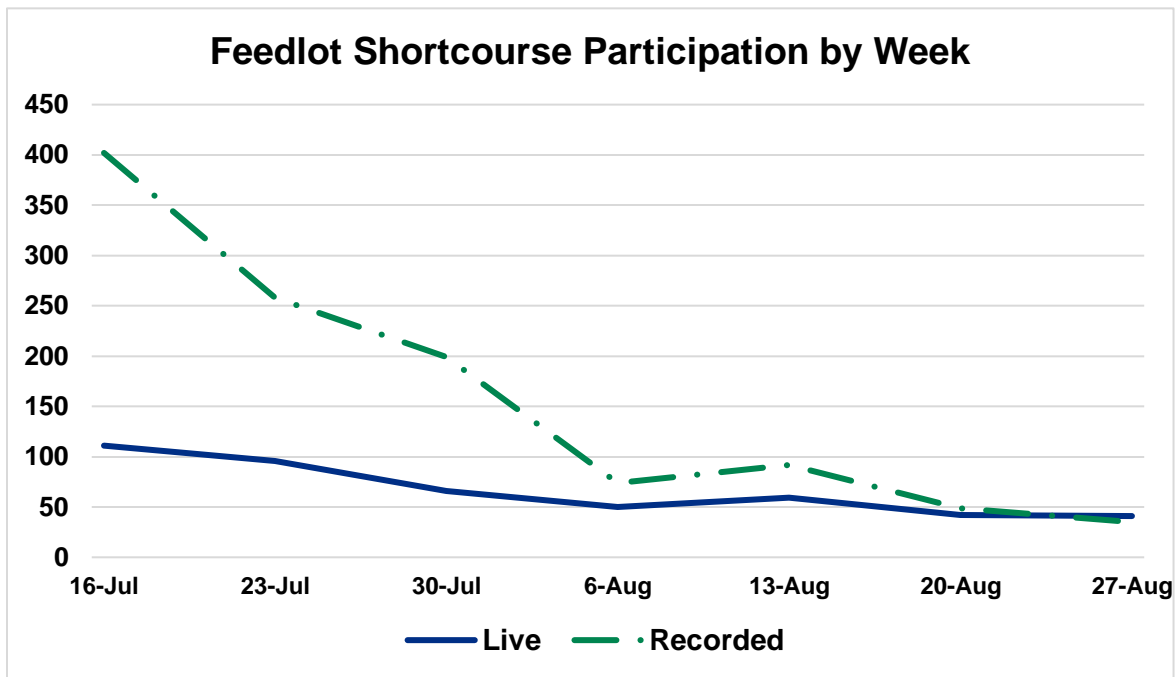
We all look forward to the day when in-person Extension programming can be more easily accommodated. Virtual methods offer an additional tool to enhance, but not completely replace more traditional educational programming approaches.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the speakers listed above who graciously shared their expertise for this program as well as recognize Lindsey Gerard, SDSU Extension iGrow Technology Coordinator for her assistance with the registration website and for troubleshooting during the Zoom sessions. We would also like to recognize CHS Nutrition, Dakotaland Feeds, and Zoetis for sponsoring the 2020 Virtual Feedlot Shortcourse.



## Figures



**Figure 1.** Number of views for live or recorded webinar segments for each week of the Virtual Feedlot Shortcourse.

