



The Chute-side View
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Like any job, being an ultrasound technician has its ups and downs. Testy cattle. Severe weather. Reliance on machines that sometimes just don't feel the need to cooperate. It's not always an easy job.

Yet, those who arrive at the ranch, scanner in hand, ready to help the beef producer produce a better product will tell you the job is fulfilling, rewarding, and invariably *interesting*.

So just what makes a good scanning session?

"Injury free works for me," says Jason McLennan, of Belle Fourche, South Dakota. McLennan is one of the first class of ultrasound technicians trained to use the technology. He adds that animal temperament is key to maintaining a safe environment.

Dan Hines of Martin, South Dakota, agrees good cattle temperament is crucial. "It doesn't help to have cattle bouncing off the walls. That just makes it harder for everyone," he says. Hines operates in a six-state area, and has been scanning for five years.

Even good cattle can get ancy on scanning day. That's why Todd Tagtmeyer of Seibert, Colorado, puts a high premium on available help. He says, "It's important to have good people on the other side of the chute."

The facilities can also make a difference.

Tagtmeyer says producers seem to understand a roof overhead and other accommodations can make a difference in image quality. "They've been out there with us. They know," he says.

In McLennan's part of the country simple things like rubber pads to cushion the frozen ground where he stands and supplemental heat to keep equipment running properly are important amenities.

Tagtmeyer adds more producers are keeping ultrasound scanning in mind as they build new facilities. "They incorporate plans for adequate space and weather protection," he says. "They wouldn't be without those things now."

For Susan McCalib of Hillsboro, Oregon, an ultrasound technician across the western states since 1999, having an adequate power source is an important feature producers often overlook. "A dedicated power supply makes a huge difference," says McCalib. She likes to have two circuits if possible – one for the ultrasound machine and computer, and one for the clippers, oil heater, and blower.

McCalib adds having all the paperwork in order before the session begins is critical.

Those are all elements that set the stage for the purpose to the exercise – the appearance of the image on the screen.

"You can tell when they have high expectations for a particular animal, because it gets real quiet and they all gather around," laughs Tagtmeyer. "They're all looking for that animal that will give them something to brag about."

Every producer is different, and the variety appeals to Hines. "I deal with all aspects of the business – commercial, feedlots, purebred breeders from the biggest to the little guy," says Hines, "and it's always interesting to see the different approaches and different methods used. Some are simply providing a service for their bull buyers, other use ultrasound data for breeding decisions. It makes the work more enjoyable when you can see improvement in the product."



The technician rarely knows the resulting data from his scans, but working with the same operations year after year, they get to know their customers' stock.

"I can compare what I see on the screen to 15 years ago," says McLennan, "and I can see how the program has evolved and how they've made strides."

Hines agrees what he sees on the screen year after year is reflective of breeding decisions. "You can tell the producers who use ultrasound as part of the puzzle. Over three to five years there will be tremendous improvement," says Hines. He says he can identify those who are "number conscious," directing their efforts toward a particular trait. "Maybe they've focused on rib eye size, and then decide they want to increase marbling to get more flavor into the meat. You can see that change on the screen."

"I have the utmost respect for those making the breeding decisions," he adds. "It's a challenge to anticipate what the market will do five to ten years down the road, or be able to know what a heifer will do for you for the next eight to ten years."

He says it is those who focus on heifer development who often see the most herd improvement. "If you increase the quality of a bull, you may add \$10,000 to your sale, and that's certainly important and tempting," says Hines, "but those who scan their heifers and incorporate the data into their breeding program are the ones who see the fastest progress in herd improvement."

Making those decisions depends not only on good scan images, but on the data they produce, and that is up to the ultrasound lab.

McCalib takes pride in her customer service and that includes utilizing the CUP Lab® for objective third-party interpretation. "There's something to be said of the images being interpreted by an objective party, and by the same people year after year," says McCalib. "My customers are truly getting the benefit of consistency, experience, and quality service."

The CUP Lab® has maintained its commitment to providing that quality service while riding the cutting edge of ever-changing technology, an aspect of its role McLennan fully appreciates. "They've really stepped up and put their resources into improving equipment and processing," he says. "That's a plus for technicians and producers."

For some, job satisfaction comes from a job well done.

"It's challenging work, and it's satisfying to know I'm technically proficient at it," says Hines.

For some, it's love of the cattle, and working outdoors.

"If I could spend every day chute-side, out with the cattle, I'd be a happy camper," says Rod Wendorff, of Raymond, Alberta, Canada. Wendorff abandoned his first career as an accountant to take up ultrasound scanning. "I just couldn't sit inside anymore."

For others, it's the day-to-day practicality that drives most of the professional world.

"I have a wife, two kids and a mortgage," quips McLennan. "That gives me plenty of motivation."

All enjoy offering superior service to their customers, working with a variety of people and operations, and seeing herd improvement first-hand.

Whatever the conditions or motivation, the results are the same – ultrasound technicians are well-trained professionals who play a vital part in the beef production chain. "It's exciting to know we're contributing to the industry," says McLennan.