

Committed to Excellence

CAB names Gebhart Ranch the top commercial cow-calf producer for 2000.

Story by
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The Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award is presented by Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) to a cow-calf producer who has a progressive management system and who maintains excellent records. The producer has spent extra time and effort working with CAB in collecting sire-identified carcass data through the CAB Carcass Data Collection Service.

Presented at the CAB "World of Opportunity" annual conference in Whistler, British Columbia, Aug. 26, the award for 2000 went to Gebhart Ranch of Meadow, S.D.

Mike and Jane Gebhart make the most of their resources in the range country of northwestern South Dakota. That includes a twice-around pasture rotation and efficient use of labor, which is often just Mike. Sons Travis and Dalton attend South Dakota State University (SDSU) and help when they can, while married daughter Jerrica lives several hours away in the Sioux Falls area.

After considering bigger-framed, leaner-type Continental breeds in the 1980s, the Gebharts learned the cow that best fits their ranch can be found within the Angus breed. You'll still see a little Continental influence in some of the cows, but that's giving way to Angus-sired replacements.

Using artificial insemination (AI) for 25 years is not common among their type of operation; but, Mike Gebhart says, "The quality of genetics is far superior to what we could buy. Through AI, we can also use genetics that allow us to get replacement heifers out of the matings."

A continuous AI program since 1989 has improved the herd of 700 cows and 180 heifers, which is nearly 50% sired by AI bulls. The Gebharts select natural-service sires with similar bloodlines to ensure a uniform calf crop. Heifers start calving in early March, and cows begin on March 25.

Besides focusing on the female, the Gebhart Ranch aims to "produce beef that fits the consumer windows of demand." That means learning what they produce and how it performs after weaning. And that means feeding calves with a

way of gathering feedlot and carcass data.

With those ideas in mind, the Gebharts decided in spring 1996 to become a cooperating test herd for CAB. The Gebharts' commitment has grown over the last three years, from 42 head to 103 sire-identified steers fed at Kjerestad Livestock Feedlot at Quinn, S.D.

Average daily gains have been mostly 3.6-3.8 pounds (lb.) after gaining a little more than 2.1 lb./day during a 100-day backgrounding period on the ranch. A unique agreement with Kjerestad has allowed the Gebharts to sell 95% interest in the calves for a negotiated price up front, then the other 5%, split profits and individual data at harvest.

Certified Angus Beef[™] (CAB[®]) acceptance rates had increased from about 25% to near 30% in 1998 and 1999 before slipping below 20% this year due to the addition of some purchased cows and a mild winter that fostered overfeeding. The Gebharts plan to operate a closed herd now, producing all their own replacements.

Cow-calf producers who don't feed their cattle don't realize the biggest calf on Day 1 can be the least profitable at harvest or that an influx of unknown genetics can adversely affect end-product performance, but the Gebharts see this firsthand.

"You can talk about the economics of buying replacements all you want, but it's worth a lot to know what you have," Gebhart says.

"Working on sire evaluation with Woodhill Farms and Certified Angus Beef, we saw the potential for continuity in selection, all the way from calving to the rail," he says, referring to seedstock source Brian McCulloh, of Woodhill Farms, Viroqua, Wis.

He began evaluating Woodhill sires because he picked them from a list — the pedigrees and expected progeny differences (EPDs) fit what he was trying to accomplish. Gebhart says he appreciates McCulloh's advice in charting a course for greater uniformity and progress toward achieving higher CAB acceptance rates down the road.

Also recognized at the CAB annual conference for their commitment to the Program were five feedlot partners and a seedstock producer.



"We found out the hard way — some of those just don't work out here," Mike Gebhart says of exotic breeds. You'll still see a little Continental influence in some of his cows, but that's giving way to Angus-sired replacements. [PHOTO BY CARRIE HULM]

Top-volume feedyards

This year marked the first time feedlots working with CAB through the Feedlot Licensing Program (FLP) were honored during the annual awards banquet. Three Top-Volume Feeder awards recognized licensed feedlots that focused on quality and produced the largest volume of CAB carcasses from June 1, 1999, to May 31, 2000.

The Top Volume Feeder Award for 2000 went to El Oro Cattle Feeders, Moses Lake, Wash., Agri Beef's largest Northwest feedyard. It is managed by Jim Sauter. With its two satellite yards, El Oro has a one-time capacity of 60,000 head.

Sauter and all the Agri Beef staff have been committed to the FLP since signing on in March 1999. El Oro has led the way in cattle numbers, with enrollments of some 10,000 head in the first year and several thousand head of green-tag CAB cattle on feed today. El Oro's cattle manager, Eric DeTrollo, and the other quality-assurance officers share in the success.

First runner-up in the Top Volume Feeder category went to McPherson County Feeders, Marquette, Kan. Allan

Sents is the owner and manager of this 9,000-head-capacity feedlot that turns more than 20,000 head/year and has made a significant commitment to the partnership with CAB to win a top-volume award, a tribute to a higher-than-average CAB acceptance rate.

Sents just completed new processing and sorting facilities at the yard, and earlier this year he hosted a regional CAB quality assurance seminar. He has been pleased with the performance of high-percentage Angus cattle, often above yard average, and he has converted a big share of his sales to value-based grid marketing.

The second runner-up was Darnall Feedlot, Harrisburg, Neb. Gary Darnall is the owner and manager of this 14,000-head-capacity western Nebraska feedlot, one of the first to license with CAB in February 1999.

Darnall has gone far beyond the volume requirements, enrolling several thousand head. He has been a great co-operator and has helped in getting the CAB feedlot database established. He is a true believer in getting data back to cow-calf customers.

Progressive partner

The FLP involves some of the most progressive cattle feeders in the world. Sometimes it's not the size of the yard, but the size of the manager's ideas that make the difference.

The Progressive Partner Award is given to the licensed partner feedlot that exemplifies the best use of strategies to build the partnership with CAB and the overall focus on quality beef production and marketing. This is based on a combination of creativity in procurement and partnering with Angus producers, adjustments in management to enhance CAB acceptance, and sharing information and educational efforts.

The first-ever Progressive Partner Award went to Samson Inc., Platte Center, Neb. Scott Mueller is manager of this family operation.

One of the unique facts about the Muellers is that they are the only dual licensee among the CAB feedlot partners. Mueller's wife, Pat, manages Traditions Inn Bed & Breakfast, a 100% CAB licensed restaurant, along with an attached pub and gift shop in nearby Columbus, Neb.

Mueller grew up in the feeding business and established his own operation 12 years ago. The name *Samson* comes from Scott A. Mueller's initials and an open invitation to his sons Brandon, 17, and Jordan, 12. That's a small example of the cre-



Every Angus-influenced steer or heifer at El Oro, regardless of ownership, is enrolled in the Feedlot Licensing Program upon arrival or at reimplant time, says **Jim Sauter**, manager of El Oro Cattle Feeders, Moses Lake, Wash. [PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER]



"Our goal is to be world-class, which means best in our business," says **Scott Mueller**, Samson Inc., Platte Center, Neb. "We will accomplish this through customer focus, continuous improvement and relationship development."

ativity Mueller applies to everything he does, keeping excellence as the standard of output.

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Mueller pursues strategies to increase grade and CAB acceptance without sacrificing feedlot performance. He's a dedicated cattle feeder, but he's also research-oriented and data-driven. Examples are his standardized cost-of-gain database, tracking every pen by source and moving toward higher levels of source verification.

Mueller uses a feeding regime that improves both feed efficiency and quality

grade 6% over the average. He sells a portion of the feedlot waste as garden compost. He set up a steer futurity to feed as few as five head in a commingled pen with other producers who are just getting started feeding their cattle. And he shares all of these innovations and ideas with customers at regular meetings in his Producer Improvement Program.

Since most of those deals take place over a juicy CAB steak at Traditions Inn, producers get the connection to final product quite well.

Samson has expanded continuously since opening and is currently near the 2,700-head-capacity mark with a permit for 5,500 head.

Through growing relationships with seedstock producers, Samson is building a network of genetically similar cattle to feed, to evaluate and to improve through the partnership with CAB.

Partner of the year

The Feedlot Partner of the Year Award recognizes the licensed feedlot that has been the most actively involved in the FLP and the most committed to its success during the past year. This is based on a combination of volume of enrolled cattle, CAB-accepted cattle, acceptance rate, cumulative feedlot performance, strategies that build the partnership with CAB and attention to detail.

The 2000 Feedlot Partner of the Year, Irsik & Doll Co., demonstrates today the way cattle feeders will do business in the future. John Petz is the CEO of this cattle feeding and grain company that operates five licensed CAB feedlots with a 170,000-head one-time capacity between Cimarron and Scott City, Kan. The company grew from 2,500 head almost 40 years ago by focusing on service and attention to detail.

As a CAB partner, they were the first to enroll and to tag cattle. Irsik & Doll was the first licensee to arrange for on-site quality assurance training. They recognized management can make or break a set of potentially high-quality Angus cattle, and they wanted their people to have every training advantage.

They knew it wouldn't be easy to switch from the commodity cash cattle market to structured, value-based sales with premiums and discounts. They worked with CAB in establishing a seminar for their management staff that included Kansas State University agricultural economics experts.

No other cattle feeding company has worked more effectively with its producer clientele to pass along what the staff learns in seminars. Irsik & Doll has devel-



One of the main components of the joint CAB/Irsik & Doll approach is data. "Without data, cattle are cattle," says **Ron Kramer**, customer services director, shown with **Bill Wohlenhaus** (left), manager of the Irsik & Doll Feed Yard near Garden City, Kan.



"You can't tell which animal is best just by their phenotype," says **Brian McCulloh**, of this year's seedstock award winner, Woodhill Farms, Viroqua, Wis. "We have to admit we don't know that until they calve, wean and breed back."

oped and is implementing some of the most innovative procurement, shared-ownership and marketing programs available in the industry today in terms of being able to pass both information and premiums from high-quality cattle back to producers.

Although Irsik & Doll was founded and grew on the principles of managing and marketing cattle as commodities and selling on the average, Petz and all the staff recognize the future is tied to increasing the focus on customers and cattle as individuals.

A big advantage in being a CAB partner is the confidence in getting data back to producers, says Irsik & Doll's customer services director, Ron Kramer. "That's the key thing in the industry right now, and retained ownership by the cow-calf sector is the key to Irsik & Doll's continued growth."

Petz sees the partnership as a good match between two leaders in the beef industry and two organizations that see value in people. Irsik & Doll saw its people were its greatest asset, allowing them to continue to grow in this period of change in the beef industry.

Now, more ready than ever, Irsik & Doll is forging ahead with seedstock partnerships and model alliances that network commercial cow-calf customers with similar genetics. They are gathering data and basing procurement and partnership deals on that data.

Seedstock winner

Woodhill Farms, a Viroqua, Wis., Angus operation, won the Seedstock Com-

mitment to Excellence Award. Brian and Lori McCulloh accepted the honor for Woodhill.

The annual award recognizes a producer who works closely with CAB and the American Angus Association to improve and to expand the Angus genetic database. This is accomplished by evaluating progeny to improve the EPD accuracies and cooperating in other areas. Information exchange and honest assessment is vital to everyone involved in this process.

Woodhill Farms started in 1984, when Daniel and Anne Borgen offered McCulloh the position of managing partner on their family's place. He would pursue a dream of taking an Angus herd from concept to national acclaim, starting with 35 cows. Woodhill will register 260 Angus calves this fall, including those from a new embryo-transfer (ET) program. To gain uniform predictability, most of the herd ties to just 12 proven cow families and five sire lines.

To date, progeny carcass data have been recorded on 900 calves from 29 Woodhill bulls, more than 100 of those calves on the Gebhart Ranch at Meadow, S.D., this year (see page 1). McCulloh looks forward to full use of the ultrasound technology that will provide real-time data on both heifers and bulls, making EPDs even more accurate.

The Association's *Fall 2000 Sire Evaluation Report* features 42 Woodhill sires, and most of them include EPDs for carcass traits. Several of these are widely used through AI, and that generates a lot more progeny data.

Some Woodhill sires rank in the top 5% of the Angus breed for marbling. In fact, most of the Woodhill herd is in the top 20% for marbling. "I need retail product now — moderate size, easy-doing cattle that will peel off outside fat," McCulloh says. "I try to make my cows produce bulls I think the Angus breed will need."

Toward that end, McCulloh has characterized his entire cow herd for these traits, and he can tell you from memory the EPDs and four-generation pedigrees of any cow in his pastures. At breeding time, he individually matches each cow with the sire that should complement her strengths and weaknesses.

Though he has served as an official cattle judge from Denver and Fort Worth to Melbourne, Australia, McCulloh hung up the microphone because he knew "you can't tell which animal is best just by their phenotype. We have to be honest and admit we don't know that until they calve, wean and breed back. It's humbling to work with biological systems!

"Seedstock producers must be students of the industry, honestly evaluate their own cattle and give straightforward advice to their customers," he says. "Take a sincere interest in where they want to go, and help them get there."

That includes pointing out the increasing rewards the market offers for hitting the CAB target, but it's also helping customers find market solutions when their cattle have far to go.