

# Making It Work

*Eastern Montana Angus ranch maintains top health, genetics to hit natural target.*



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PHOTOS BY DEANNA WALENCIAK

*Story by*  
**MIRANDA REIMAN**

Most commercial cattlemen don't report to a board of directors, but that's reality for Jerry Klempel. The Lambert, Mont., rancher doesn't mind a bit.

"The partners are really good people to get along with, and they want to raise the best cattle that can be raised," he says.

Klempel, wife Janice, and one of the couple's four children, Jason, manage the family herd in tandem with that of the Veebaray Co.

ranch. It's been that way since 1998, when they took over management of the investor-owned operation and doubled the number of cows they were managing to include 800 females and room for summering 1,200 head.

Klempel grew up right next door to Veebaray, which was formed in the 1920s and is now owned by stockholder heirs.

"They're always wondering how things are going with the weather and that kind of stuff," Klempel says. He sees a few family members once or twice a year. "They've never taken any money off the place. If a profit is raised, they put it back into improvements."

He praises the investors for putting capital toward fixing fences, winterizing water lines and buying equipment. The autonomy they give him allows Klempel to make management and marketing decisions as if he were the sole owner.

"We just run it all together. It isn't like there's one of my calves and one of their calves," he explains.

## **Profit focus**

Of course, just like any business,

he's focused on turning a profit. Toward that end, he's been enrolling calves in the AngusSource® program to "hopefully catch a premium." Moreover, 2008 marks the fourth year Klempel has maintained a naturally raised status on the calves.

Initially he made the switch at the request of the Beef Marketing Group (BMG), a marketing cooperative of Kansas and Nebraska feedyards that supplies *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand Natural for Tyson Fresh Meats. To qualify for the CAB Natural label, cattle must be individually identified and never receive antibiotics, hormonal implants, ionophores or animal byproducts.

"The first year we made that contract, I was really worried about sickness and all that," Klempel says. It played to his advantage, however, that he'd already been getting the calves off to a good start at home.

"I've never sold right off the cow, because they always paid a little more for a weaned calf," he says.

The steer calves are backgrounded in a feedlot for 70 days before shipping. The ration typically includes homegrown barley

Several years ago, Klempel began wrapping his alfalfa bales to help maintain quality hay.



and haylage, along with sugar beet pulp from a local plant. Several years ago, Klempel began wrapping his alfalfa bales to help maintain quality hay.

He consults with Russell Johnson, of R&J Ag Supply, Sidney, Mont., to develop specific rations each year.

“We get samples of all the different feedstuffs and then we have them tested at the lab,” Johnson says. They come up with the most affordable combination and add the micronutrients. “He has never been one to cheat on his diets, which is one reason it works.”

They target a 2.5-pound (lb.)-per-day gain, a full pound less than they would on conventional cattle.

“We push them pretty hard,” Klempel says, noting some adjustments were needed to eliminate ionophores and antibiotics from the diet. “I won’t even have any of that on the place while calves are on the natural program. I don’t want anybody to ever come back and say, ‘How do you know these calves didn’t get into it? How do you know you emptied your feed truck out all the way?’”

Johnson says the cattle do so well because the whole herd gets fed in the winter and supplemented on grass.

“You have to have your immune system in good condition to prevent problems,” he says. “Everything has to work together as a complete management system. It isn’t just one little segment.”

### It works

Data from a set of 228 calves fed through BMG show how that comprehensive approach fares well on down the line. The calves gained 2.5 lb. per day and went more than 58% CAB, including Prime. Only 10 head dropped out of the program because they were treated.

Of course, Klempel knows that kind of success isn’t just a mark of how they’re fed; it starts with the genetics.

“I aim for lots of ribeye and easy-conditioning cows. We live in some pretty rough country up here with severe temperature changes, so we need cattle that flesh easy,” he says. “That relates back to the marbling. If they’ve got the marbling, they’re usually easier-keeping cattle.”

His cow herd has a strong Sitz and Gartner-Denowh base, and from there he selects bulls with expected progeny differences (EPDs) that are moderate for milk and under 90 for yearling weight.

“I never wanted any big cattle,” he says. “I figured I could run 12 cows for their 10 and get two more calves.”

The Klempels maximize ranch resources in other ways, too. They have a rock quarry business, and Jason has hauled many loads out to nearby oil fields.

After Oct. 1 weaning, the month of November is devoted to another enterprise: trophy mule deer hunts. The Klempels hire an outfitter to guide 15 to 18 different groups for the season.

“It’s a different class of people, but good people,” Klempel says. “Most people who hunt and enjoy the outdoors

really respect what we do in the livestock business.”

Not long after the hunters ship out, so do the preconditioned calves.

“It’s been like clockwork for 10 or 12 years,” Klempel says.

It’s that kind of regularity that kicks out high-quality calves that fit the CAB Natural brand.



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