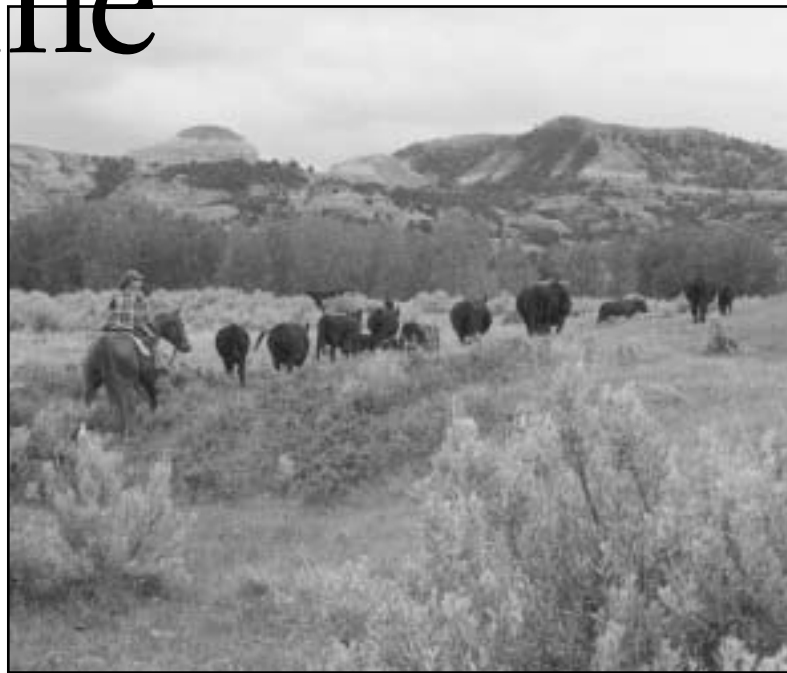


Making a Difference Begins at Home

The Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program's Commercial Producer of the Year award is based on the ranch's efforts to evaluate registered Angus bulls for carcass merit through the Sire Evaluation Program. Other criteria include keeping communications open between CAB Program staff, the American Angus Association and the feedyard receiving the calves. In addition, the commercial producer must be willing to spend the extra time necessary to ensure proper identification of sire groups and maintain in-depth records on the calves for Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) reports.

1998 Commercial
Producer of the Year
HARRIS RANCH
Killdeer, N.D.



(Above) Harris Ranch knows the Angus breed works in every segment of the beef industry, so it will continue to utilize Angus genetics in the herd. The Harris family will continue its dedication to the Sire Evaluation Program.



(Left) "Being involved with the Sire Evaluation Program allowed us to identify the cattle that were working for us but not the consumer," says Gene Harris.

Story and photos by
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Establishing a program and goals for a cattle operation are critical to its success. Gene Harris and his family have utilized Angus genetics within their operation to help them reach their goals. They also understand that if changes need to be made in the beef industry, things must first change at the ranch.

A third-generation operation, Harris Ranch began in 1940 when Gene's grandfather trailed a herd of cattle to an early homestead at Killdeer, N.D. The herd began with and used Hereford cows until the late '70s. Changes began when Angus bulls were used on first-calf heifers. Although some exotic breeds were used during the race for pounds, Angus bulls prevailed.

"With Angus bulls, a better and greater genetic change could be seen in the cow herd," Gene says.

"It was then we decided to stay with Angus genetics so we could utilize the entire ranch and not have to keep everything separated in different breeding pastures."

In 1981 Gene's grandfather and father passed away, leaving him to raise his younger brother and take over the ranch. Also during this time, Gene married his wife, Gynell, who is an integral part of the ranch's operation today. Together with their two children, Turner and Skye, they manage more than 450 cows, breed 700 females and manage more than 500 yearlings. They control more than 27,000 acres of owned, leased and partnership land.

Their involvement with the CAB Program and the American Angus Association's Sire Evaluation Program started in 1992, testing bulls for an Angus breeder in Montana.

"We came to a point in our operation when we needed to take the

next logical step. Our cows were working in our environment, and we wanted to see them work in the consumer sector," explains Gene. "Being involved with the Sire Evaluation Program allowed us to identify the cattle that were working for us but not the consumer. We were able to cull some of the cows and still make the genetic improvements necessary."

Boosting the cow herd's genetics is only part of the solution to improving the end product. Gene knows the bull side of the equation can have a greater effect on the entire industry.

"We have had the opportunity to prove some bulls that have gone on to be widely used in the breed," says Gene. "It makes you feel good that a bull you tested as a young sire has gone on to have a major impact on the Angus breed and that you had a small part to play in making this bull great."

A total package

Although the focus of the Sire Evaluation Program is on carcass merit, Gene knows the real genetic progress rests in the bulls with a total performance package that fit all segments of the industry. Harris Ranch has tested eight bulls since 1992. Some of the replacement females are retained within the herd,

but the majority are bred and sold. These females have proven data behind them, suiting the many buyers who want the guesswork taken out of their purchasing decisions.

"People still buy from people, so many potential customers will trust what I tell them rather than ask for a lot of paperwork on the females," explains Gene. "They want cattle that will perform on a high-roughage diet and produce calves that will have 6 pounds (lb.) of feed per pound of gain. These customers don't want to go through what we've had to go through to get good-performing females."

The steer calves are sold to a feedyard in Illinois. The feedlot purchases calves on what Gene terms a "gentleman's agreement." Gene calls the feedyard and lets the owner know what he has available. The feedyard personnel know the calves will be vaccinated according to their preferences, so trucks are dispatched to the ranch with a blank check. Gene weighs the calves, loads the trucks and fills out the check. Not a lot of business is done in this manner these days, where both sides must have 100% trust in the other side.

"I still believe there is a cattle industry and a beef business. We

need to get it into one total package. We both know the calves will perform once they reach the feedyard; but, when we negotiate price, we come to a mutually beneficial point. This way we both can stay in business and make money at the same time," Gene says.

Commercial benefit

Gene sees several benefits for commercial-producer involvement in the Sire Evaluation Program. He says producers need to understand where their program fits in the industry. Many producers have a strong artificial insemination (AI) program in place, so the transition to testing bulls can be made without a lot of inconvenience to the herd's daily management.

Gene appreciates the support from CAB Program staff and the amount of information returned from the feedyard and packing plant after the calves have been harvested. This data allows him to see if they are on track with the rest of the industry and what changes should be incorporated.

"As more alliances come about, there will be more chances to obtain additional premiums on the calves that have a history of producing carcasses the industry needs," says Gene. "The CAB Program allows producers to tie themselves to the consumer."

Keeping pace

Gene also knows that things must be done differently today than they were when his grandfather managed the ranch. These differences are part of the Harris Ranch's success and how it has been able to progress through many changes within the cattle industry.

"Today we have to do a few other things in all different segments of the industry. The CAB Program is very successful with the image it projects over the other brands. It gets me excited that over a million pounds of product are chosen today; and if we ensure these people are happy, then we know what they will choose tomorrow," explains Gene.

"As more alliances come about, there will be more chances to obtain additional premiums on the calves that have a history of producing carcasses the industry needs," says Gene Harris.

As the beef industry faces some of its biggest challenges to regain market share, commercial producers are more aware that the consumer should be their focus. The loss of market share began when beef quality and consistency diminished. Most producers are of an independent nature and follow their own goals, but many still do not know what type of end product they are producing. Gene knows how easy it is to forget

about the consumers and cautions producers about becoming self-serving.

"Somebody forgot who the ultimate end-product user was and thought when the truck gate slammed shut, that was the end. We also gave our secrets away to the poultry industry," Gene says. "Thirty or forty years ago we only had a few breeds of cattle, and our gene pools were tight. As we infused other breeds into the mix and mongrelized our cow herds, the poultry industry was narrowing its genetic pool. Now as we begin to narrow our genetics again, we see the breeds that were highly successful in the '70s and early '80s are the ones struggling, because the cows are not working on the range or in retail."

Harris Ranch knows the Angus breed works in every segment of the beef industry, so it will continue to utilize Angus genetics in the herd. The Harris family will continue its dedication to the Sire Evaluation Program. They became bored with turning a set of bulls out with a set of cows and selling a set of calves at the end. They like using AI to challenge what the cow herd is capable of producing. They have worked a long time to put together a set of top-performing cows that can work in the ranch's environment. Gene understands that a producer only has a few generations to change a cow herd in one's lifetime and actually has fun trying to do it.

Fun and a love for this way of life are what drive Gene Harris to set higher goals and drive the ranch's success. Gene and his family are true believers in what they do. To be recognized for trying to make a difference makes them feel honored and humbled. The Harris-ees see the award as an honor for their cow herd for producing cattle that are satisfying consumers.

Gene also knows one person can't save the entire industry, but if individuals do their parts in their segments, things will change. Keeping things in perspective makes the hard work enjoyable and satisfying.

"I wake up in the morning, and I love my job," Gene says. "We're a traditional ranch; we still do our cow work on horseback [and] drag our calves to the branding fire It takes a lot to be a cattle producer today, and not everybody can do it. We are not going to save the entire cattle industry; but, if we all do what we can in our segment, then we've done all we could, and we can feel good about that."

The CAB Program salutes Harris Ranch because of its commitment to improving beef quality one mating at a time. The Harris-ees' involvement in the Sire Evaluation Program and the Angus breed show their dedication can produce positive results both on and off the ranch.

