

# Stepping Up to Quality

*It doesn't take a big herd to be big on profit-making quality.*

Story & photos by  
**LARRY STALCUP**

Conservative beef man Bill Stroman would rather sell his calves than feed them out. But he's exploring all the options for his 80-cow commercial Angus herd. The



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reward may be worth the risk because of what he has learned from feeding at a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedyard.

Stroman runs the Willow Creek Ranch herd on rough, rolling hill pasture outside Sterling City, Texas. The ranch includes backgrounding pens to help get calves ready for the next production phase.

His feeding results have been as welcome as a rare West Texas rain: 70%-90% Choice quality grade, and a \$35 premium per head for age and source verification.

"I'd prefer not to own calves after they reach 600 to 800 pounds (lb.)," Stroman says. "There's a lot of risk in carrying them on through the feeding process. But by running them through a CAB yard, you know where you are. It gives you records on your calves that you wouldn't have gotten at the auction barn."

Stroman is like many smaller ranchers, says Gary Fike, beef



cattle specialist with CAB. "He is looking for ways to improve his herd through feeding out a few calves and pushing for top performance."

"I used to run Beefmaster cattle until we had too many years of drought," Stroman says. "The bigger cattle needed more grass, and we didn't have it."

## Angus move

That was about 2004. He answered the grass problem by selling the Beefmasters and switching to Angus. The move, along with a little bit of rain, has garnered greener pastures.

The Angus herd began with heifers purchased out of Nebraska, using

premium Angus bulls from Texas and Kansas sources. "We now retain heifers to build up herd numbers," Stroman says, "and they are yielding good calves."

When the AngusSource® program came out, he began enrolling Willow Creek calves, sending his first group to a feedyard in early 2007. Those calves graded about 75% Choice.

For 2008, he sent half of his calves to the CAB-licensed Keeling Cattle Feeders at Hereford, Texas. "We sent 26 steers averaging 778 pounds and 14 heifers weighing 765 pounds," he says. They were 13 months old and ready for finishing.

"Bill's calves did really well," says Scott Keeling, feedyard owner-manager and

2008 CAB Progressive Partner of the Year. “They finished at about 1,350 pounds.”

That was after 173 days on feed. They had an average daily gain of 3.67 lb., and a dry-matter (DM)-conversion rate of 6.5 lb. of feed per pound of gain before grading 90% Choice.

“The calves were everything Bill said they would be,” Keeling says. “They sold for \$99 per hundredweight (cwt.) in August [cash market],” reports Keeling, who partnered with Stroman in the feeding program. “With the age and source verification premium of \$35 per head, the cattle brought a total of \$102.24 per hundredweight.”

Even with the premiums, a poor cattle market produced closeouts that yielded a \$25-per-head loss. But that was at a time when most cattle were losing well over \$50 per head, and some near \$100 after high corn costs added to the cost of gain.

The cattle didn’t quite achieve CAB acceptance, but Keeling says the performance and grade showed him the Stroman herd can send good calves to the feedyard.

“I’ll certainly look at buying his calves next time,” Keeling says, “if he doesn’t feed them out himself.”

### **Fenceline weaning**

Well-planned weaning and preconditioning programs are vital for most calves if they’re to perform at the feedyard. Fenceline weaning was added in 2007 to help relieve stress on the 7-month-old calves as they are separated from their mothers.

“It seemed to work because we had no calves jumping the fence,” Stroman says.

Preconditioning included a Vision 7 BVD (bovine viral diarrhea) and IBR (infectious bovine rhinotracheitis) vaccination schedule. After weaning, calves were fed hay and a weaning ration.

“That was until after they stopped bawling,” Stroman says. “Then we fed cottonseed and grain cubes.”

Perhaps one reason fenceline weaning worked so well is the herd’s mild manners. Cows nearly eat cake out of Stroman’s hand.

“They are nice and gentle,” he says. “That really helps in our overall program.”

Recent fenceline weaning research at the Noble Foundation in Ardmore, Okla., showed calves weaned that way gained nearly twice as much per day (1.25 lb.) in the preconditioning phase as traditionally weaned contemporaries (0.7 lb.). The Noble study showed daily gain in the first and third weeks was significantly higher for the fenceline group.

Still, that management option will have to be an alternating process for Stroman, because cows are not always near a good fence at weaning.

“We have to move cattle to rotate our grazing,” he says, “so fenceline weaning will be something that we use periodically.”

### **CAB Natural?**

Future avenues for Stroman may involve working to bunch his calves

with others in an AngusSource® program. And he is considering marketing his calves as eligible for CAB Natural, an option that works out for about 100,000 cattle annually. The natural premiums paid are typically well above those paid for conventional high-quality calves at harvest.

“It’s a possibility,” says Stroman, who refrains from implanting calves or using antibiotics to promote growth.

Fike says the natural program is a valid alternative for many producers.

“There is strong demand among retailers and some consumers,” he says. “Our natural product is extremely popular at the supermarket. Bill’s program looks like it could be a winner in the natural program.”

No matter which direction Stroman takes, he can be confident that his calves

should be near the top of the market, thanks to what he learned by feeding them out.

“The option that gets me more money per head is the way I’ll go,” he says. “That’s what I’m trying to do — maximize return from these bulls.”

