

Feeder Focus:

First Steps

Nebraska CAB partner helps feeding customers find value-added path.

Story & photos by
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Gary White is not one to rush in, but he's not afraid to try new things after some research. He likes to "precondition" an idea before bringing it into practice.

The Lexington, Neb., feeder grew up in the cattle business but never considered it his destiny in those days.

"In high school I was more involved in sports and never thought much about coming back to the farm," he recalls. There were 4-H calf and sheep projects, "but I was going to do something else."

Those roots explain the animal science degree at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1969, and the ambivalence pointing him to two years with the Peace Corps in Colombia upon graduation. That was no sudden impulse, but came about after a senior level class taught by a former Peace Corps volunteer.

"I was like a livestock extension agent for the coffee growers' federation," he says. Leaders there recognized that coffee grows well between 3,000 feet (ft.) and 6,000 feet, but cattle are a key enterprise on the lowlands (Brahman) and highlands (Normande).

White would give educational

presentations on vaccinations, spraying for ticks, recordkeeping and other management topics. He found the experience "interesting" and says now, "I probably learned more than I taught."

Cattle call

One lesson was that he felt the call of cattle as a vocation, and returned to his alma mater to pursue a master's degree in beef production. That road led home by 1974, when all the ideas were ready for practice on the place White's great-great-grandfather had homesteaded.

The ancestors couldn't have envisioned the 2,500-head feedlot or automated irrigation, but White has seen 40 years of modernization and consolidation. "It's just the nature of business," he says, with a perspective drawn from Peace Corps days.

"Sometimes we might take for granted our land-grant university system where they do the research and Extension brings it out to us. And a lot of the farmers have college degrees now," he says. "This scale wouldn't work without that level of education and Extension."

Having watched the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) program grow to include a feedlot network, White was preconditioning the idea of signing on as a CAB partner for several years.

He was selling high-quality Angus cattle through the GeneNet marketing alliance, and it looked like CAB could broaden his ability to collect data through several packer options. Cow-calf customers craved education on their herds, and those carcass reports helped White improve as a custom feeder of specific ranch cattle.

"I had read some stuff on CAB, and I had followed it, but never took the step to get involved," he says, until one day in fall 2009.

Feeding forum

That first step was a Feeding Quality Forum in nearby Grand Island, Neb., where White met CAB's beef cattle specialist Paul Dykstra and took in a program that aligned with his quality goals.

"Feedyards can be a natural fit as CAB partners, especially if the manager already has the same quality ideas," says Dykstra, who visited with White after the forum, going over details.



It didn't cost anything but more attention to those details to get the payoff of more information and leads to more of the kind of cattle he wanted. "Just better quality all the way around, from start to finish," he says.

White's holistic approach boosts performance in the feedyard, which caters to a mix of genetics that reflect the beef industry. Amid the diversity, Angus cattle stand out.

"We like feeding them because they perform well, without much trouble, and they're easy to sell because they're the same kind the consumer wants," he says.

When it comes to the bottom line, the Angus advantage can be leveraged with feeding and marketing strategies. Not claiming to have all the answers or a corner on perfection there, White says, "I just do a lot of little things pretty good."

Outside expertise helps in several areas. Jeremy Martin, nutritionist at Great Plains Livestock Consulting, Eagle, Neb., develops and monitors the feed rations. Ultrasound technician Keith Rudeen, Overton, Neb., applies the scan to add certainty on some groups of cattle headed for grid marketing.

Studying cattle over the years, White has calibrated his eye to sort, too. Whether visual only or ultrasound-assisted, he says sorting reduces time on feed and helps hit the top value targets.

Not surprisingly, this cattle feeder likes to work with ranchers who pay attention to detail and plan ahead, from genetics to health, weaning and shipment to the feedlot. Some come from as far away as Montana.

"We try to develop relationships and share all the information we can, because it helps us all," White says, noting that several customers share cattle ownership with him. Information is in the background when agreeing on value at placement: "They expect to get a good price, but their cattle are usually worth it," he adds.

The feedback system is working, and White can point to customers who have improved both performance and carcass merit in their cattle over the past few years.

Partner cattle are generally high-percentage Angus, and they come in well-adjusted to independent feedlot living. "Preconditioning really pays," he says. "They get started on the right foot at home and that gives them a head start here."

It also gives them a quality-grade and premium advantage in the packinghouse, adding value all the way to the satisfied consumer.

That's how White sees sustainable beef production today, looking ahead toward building demand but rooted in the heritage and land his family has cultivated for more than a century.



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