



Big on Quality

Poky Feeders wins CAB Feedlot Commitment to Excellence Award.

Story & photos by
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One of the largest cattle feeders in the country aims for high-quality results and hits that target every day. Poky Feeders, Scott City, Kan., turns 3,700 head per week, and nearly 37% of 120,000 Poky-fed Angus cattle earned the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand at National Beef Packing last year.

Manager Joe Morgan says there's still room for improvement, but the business has come a long way since he started in 1985. That was a few years after cattlemen from near Pocahontas, Iowa, named and founded it — unfortunately coinciding with the worst farm recession in decades.

Morgan and a dedicated staff rose from those precarious times to grow into a huge, but family-oriented business dedicated to “the people side” and premium-quality beef.

Wayne Anderson, Williams, Iowa, who maintained an interest in Poky from the start, joined Morgan in Tucson, Ariz., Sept 22-24, where their business was honored with the 2016 CAB Feedlot Commitment to Excellence Award at the brand's annual conference.

“Most of the cattle were company-owned in the 1980s,” Morgan says, contrasting that with the current 5%. That shift was gradual as customers wanted to own more of a growing herd. Now, Poky only owns the high-risk pens, which alleviates some customer worries.

It speaks more to the consistent quality in the Poky system today than a shift in risk, says Grant Morgan, son and assistant

manager who came back in 2008 after a few years in allied industry.

From the start, his father says, “We figured that to grow, it was going to be more and more important to do the right things and promote the right things. It was going to make us more successful and our customers more successful.”

Ranchers had little incentive to retain ownership or improve cattle when they all sold for the same price, but Morgan hit the road to start building relationships. The confidence to travel was “thanks to

a lot of good, reliable people who have devoted their lives to us and the success of Poky,” he says.

The yard grew to 30,000, then 40,000 head in the mid-1990s when friends in the area began meeting to kick around ideas that helped create U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) a couple of years later.

Getting paid for quality

Investing heavily in USPB shares with the right and obligation to supply many

Feedlot Commitment to Excellence



thousands of cattle, Morgan took that risk to reduce it and reward quality going forward. Obligations met opportunity as the cattle feeder redoubled efforts to build relationships with producers from



The main yard is at a practical limit for feedmill size and a seasoned crew. Departmental foremen, a risk manager and a longtime chief financial officer assure continuity there while Joe Morgan (right) and future manager Grant Morgan (left) look to the broadening avenue of partnering.

Arkansas to Oregon. That led to another wave of expansions to current capacity.

Ideas of grid marketing and strategic alliances were sweeping across the beef industry.

Morgan says he watched CAB's creation as a young Angus producer near Atlantic, Iowa, later seeing its growth across the industry and in the registered herd he maintained at Scott City until recent years. CAB really stepped up to realize its potential "when it became a line item on the packer grids," he says.

"If you put a target out there with a reward, a farmer or rancher will get there — it's just their nature," Morgan says. "Everybody thought they had the best steer in the West until they fed and found out.

"When one guy got a \$30 or \$40 premium over a neighbor's cattle, it didn't take long for people to realize they had to improve their genetics — the message was passed on to the ranch pretty fast," he says. "Once they knew marbling was highly heritable and didn't affect the maternal side, they were able to meet their goals."

Poky customers in the last year number more than 300 in 13 states. They include scores of ranchers who, like the Morgans, understand the great advantage of Angus cattle in providing both functional cows and premium beef.

There are second- and even third-generation managers still making handshake deals. Klint and Lori Swanson, of Shipwheel Cattle Co., Chinook, Mont., represent hundreds in recollecting the roots of their link.

"I'm guessing it was around 20 years ago when Joe came to our place," Klint Swanson says. "I remember him sitting down at our kitchen table and visiting. He said that he had heard about my family's [Apex Angus] cattle and was very interested in purchasing our steers." A deal was struck, and "we've been sending them cattle ever since."

Steers from Shipwheel's balanced program regularly grade 90% to 100% Choice or better with 65% CAB, and the Swansons lead customer tours to see Poky and National Beef plants where all learn more about their cattle and the industry.

With a nod to those balanced genetics, Morgan says, "We are feeding the fastest-growing, best-grading cattle we have ever fed." Poky and its network of like-minded partners will gladly feed more of those, but not by building more pens. The main yard is at a practical limit for feedmill size and its seasoned crew.

Departmental foremen, a risk manager and a longtime chief financial officer assure continuity there while Joe and future manager Grant Morgan look to the broadening avenue of partnering.

Grant "keeps pushing" his father to grow the business.

"His coming back sure gave me a new reason to continue at this pace," Joe says. "We're not going to take a step backwards."



A 30-year mission transformed Poky Feeders into a huge, but family-oriented business dedicated to the people side and premium-quality beef. They're big, yes — big on quality. Sales to National Beef last year on behalf of 300 customers included nearly 45,000 Angus cattle accepted for the brand, enabling 13 million lb. of product sales.

