

Riverbend Ranch Earns CAB Honors

Idaho ranch earns Commitment to Excellence Award.

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Unless you're building an ark, little good can come from 45 inches of rain in 20 days.

That's what happened when Hurricane Floyd hit Snow Hill, N.C., in fall 1999.

For cattleman Steve Harrison, the results were life changing. As the flood waters rose, half of the family's cow herd — the one he'd returned to the farm to manage — was lost.

When people asked about his plans in the aftermath, he simply answered, "I can't go back to working in the hog barns."

So Harrison headed west.

At the same time, more than 2,000 miles away from that coastal farming community, Frank and Belinda VanderSloot and the crew at Riverbend Ranch prepared for their first production sale in Idaho Falls, Idaho.

Although he grew up hand-milking a cow to help provide for the family, VanderSloot was a businessman who was just getting into the registered cattle business.

Today it is one of the largest Angus operations in the country.

VanderSloot says he didn't choose the breed.

"That was a decision made by the people. That's where the demand is. People want what Angus brings to the table," he says. "That's a tribute to the people who have been running the Angus breed for the last century."

He simply built on the strengths.

"The foundation was super great mother cows," VanderSloot says. "It was a selection of one at a time — there were no group purchases, ever."

The only way a female entered the herd was if she could pass on paper and in eye appeal.

"In my opinion, you can't have enough of the right kind," he says.

For that attitude and all the actions that support it, Riverbend Ranch received the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand 2016 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award. VanderSloot accepted the honors at the brand's annual conference Sept. 22-24 in Tucson, Ariz.

Joint effort

Harrison was in the stands at the Bonneville County, Idaho, 4-H barn for that first sale of 120 bulls.

It was another eight years before the observer hired on with Riverbend, which now markets 650 bulls a year across the United States. Just 17 full-time employees care for the ranches spread across seven locations



from California, Utah and Texas to Wyoming, Idaho and Montana.

"We empower people to make decisions and do their jobs. There's not a lot of micromanaging going on," Harrison says, praising the "lean" crew that manages all 5,500 head, registered and commercial combined. "The cattle themselves are a part of it, because we're striving for cattle that go out and work and don't require special attention. I can look after more cattle that are doing the right things."

They design cattle for the arid, harsh, high-desert ranches in their region. Cattle needed to have maternal abilities, performance at the feedyard and a quality end product for the consumer.

"The idea that you're going to wreck your cow herd selecting for carcass traits is a fallacy," Harrison says. "In this day and time, with all the selection tools we have available in this breed, and the advanced technology tools like genomics, we feel like there are plenty of cattle in the gene pool that can advance carcass traits and still keep the convenience traits the Angus cow was built on and is known for."

The average Riverbend bull will have a below-average birth weight expected progeny difference (EPD), weaning and yearling weight in the top 15% and in the top 10% for weaned calf dollar value

index (\$W). That's while maintaining a top 20% for all carcass values.

"We're highly data-driven," Harrison says.

Riverbend's enterprises include a commercial cow herd, stockers and a customer buy-back program, which has led to feeding 65,000 Riverbend-influenced calves over the past five years.

"Each successive group of cattle gets better in terms of yield, in terms of conversion, in terms of grade," Harrison says.

Riverbend purebred operations manager Dale Meek says, "For an operation our size, we use a pretty limited amount of sires in every breeding season." They narrow the list to a handful of bulls and then each cow is mated individually to the one that will "fit the strengths and weaknesses" of that animal.

"We try to build consistency through making a pretty large number of three-quarter siblings through sire groups," he says.

Barry McCoy, Dillon, Mont., has bought Riverbend bulls the past five or six years.

"What we've done is made a more efficient cow, one that's weaning a bigger percentage of her body weight and one that just requires a little less forage maintenance through winter," says the commercial cattleman, noting that he places emphasis on performance and carcass traits, too. "Even though I don't directly retain ownership of the calves, I still have the goal of providing a good product for the next user. Though it may not be direct, we benefit from that because eventually, the cattle work better."

Hearing customer success stories

Above: "In my opinion, you can't have enough of the right kind," says Frank VanderSloot.



Our intention has been to produce the absolute best-quality genetics and watch the numbers," says Frank VanderSloot of Riverbend Ranch.

is what makes it worth it for the crew, Harrison says.

"When that animal leaves our ranch, it's representing us, each and every one of us," he says. "If you get stagnant here, it's probably your own fault. There are a lot of other great benefits to the job — the scenery, the family life, everything else — but seeing improvement in the cattle is what really gets me going."

Editor's Note: Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

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