

# First-Class Production



Harris Ranch Partnership for Quality (PQ) program cattle are identified with green PQ tags at Harris Ranch Feeding Co.

PHOTO BY KIM HOLT

***Using carcass data as a measuring stick, California commercial producer continues to fine-tune genetics, while producing for branded-beef program.***

by **KIM HOLT**,  
*field editor*

In the late 1990s, Jack Cowley and his family began a producer partnership with Harris Ranch — a move he considers the “best thing” that’s ever happened to him in the cattle business.

This partnership has allowed him to collect carcass data on his family’s Angus-based commercial herd for some 16 years. The data, all individualized and returned as part of the Harris Ranch Partnership for Quality (PQ) program, is something Cowley says he still “firmly” believes in more than ever.

“It’s the only way you really know what you are developing, he explains. “If you don’t get the carcass data back, you will never know if you’re making progress or not.”

## **A quest for improvement**

A retired ophthalmologist, respected commercial cow-calf producer and leader within the California and national beef industry, Cowley and his family are dedicated to genetic improvement and beef

quality on their Cowley Family Ranch in northern California.

He relays, “Years before I was in the alliance, I would always sell my cattle to somebody who would promise me that I’d get the carcass data back, and they never did give it to me.” He’d call and bug the feedlot buyers, but they gave him 100 excuses for why it wasn’t returned.

“I was very unhappy with that. That was one of the main reasons I got into the Harris Ranch program,” Cowley states.

“Sure, we all want the premium; there’s no question about that. That’s the bottom line. But the truth of the matter was getting the carcass data back so that we can improve the genetics of our animals — the carcass qualities — is really what was driving me.”

The Cowleys raised purebred Brangus throughout the 1980s, and were very active in that breed’s state

and national associations. Cowley was also instrumental in getting the breed to collect and process expected progeny differences (EPDs), among

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his other interests and involvements, including leadership in the California Beef Cattle Improvement Association.

“I thought I knew what I was doing,” he says. “Believe me, I did not — until I started getting this data back.”

He assures, “It’s made a better cattle person out of me, because it’s made me focus on detail. I realized that there was a lot of improvement that I could make.”

## **Quality care from birth**

The Cowley Family Ranch is operated by Cowley and his three sons — David, Brian and Brent — in Little Shasta Valley, about 40 miles south of the Oregon border near the community of Montague. Cattle graze on private mountain lands and on irrigated valley pastures.

About 45% of their herd calves in fall, with the balance in spring. Two calving seasons fit the Cowley’s feed resources, plus they’re able to obtain more value out of their bulls by using them for two breeding seasons instead of just one.

“We have relatively mild winters here,” Cowley explains. “I’m in a little bit of a banana belt right where I’m at.”

The Cowley fall herd calves mid-September through Nov. 1, and calves are weaned July 1. Spring heifers start to calve Jan. 1, cows calve in February and March, and their calves are weaned in mid-September.

Cowley tags calves at birth so he has individual birth dates on record for age verification. He also keeps accurate health records because his calves are marketed into Harris Ranch’s Natural Angus Beef program, and the alliance conducts producer audits from time to time.

Harris Ranch outlines protocols for how they prefer calves are handled preweaning and at weaning, including a specific 45-day value-

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Harris Ranch sends its own trucks to pick up the Cowley family's cattle in northern California and deliver them to its feedlot seven hours south near Coalinga on I-5. This is just one of the ways in which Harris influences control over the quality of its beef from ranch to plate.

PHOTO BY ALAN BLAKELY PHOTOGRAPHY

added calf (VAC) program. The Cowley calves are weaned and backgrounded on grass and free-choice grain hay for 45 days before going straight to Harris Feeding Co., just off of I-5 near Coalinga.

Upon arrival, they are visually and electronically tagged at the feedyard to facilitate traceability through harvest and carcass-data collection.

The Harris PQ program is unique in that it gives this branded-beef company an avenue through which to source feeder cattle of known Angus genetics that meet Harris' specific criteria for health, performance and carcass quality. These cattle are targeted for the Harris Ranch Natural Angus Beef Program; about 80%-85% of this product is marketed to consumers through retail grocery stores west of the Rockies and in California (see "Storied Beef" on page 148).

"It's an Angus program, because Angus cattle have shown to have superior marbling, palatability and consistency, and that's what our customers want," points out Brad Caudill, vice president of marketing for Harris Ranch Beef Co.

Harris' PQ program started in the early 1990s "and is unique to the industry," Caudill says. "We have over 70 ranching families in this program who control 40,000-50,000 head of mother cows. These are progressive ranching families who've been in business for generation to generation."

Like Cowley, these ranch partners are strongly focused on the production of a consistent, high-quality, consumer-driven product.

As a PQ partner, Cowley is paid on market value and grid premium. He's also able to capitalize on a blip in an off-

season market. He explains, "I designed my fall-calving program to try to take advantage of that mid-August short little rise in the market." He's found it to be very consistent throughout the years.

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**Custom-designed products**

With more than 15 years of carcass records on file, these days Cowley has good data from which to fine-tune his bull-selection criteria.

"Now that I have a good record of where I'm at carcass-wise, I can better tailor-design my bull buying because I know what traits I need to work on," he remarks.

Marbling, a controlled ribeye size and minimum backfat all prominently figure into the product specifications for Harris Ranch Natural Angus Beef. Cowley explains that PQ producers can select their own bulls within Harris' genetic parameters, or Harris has a buyer who can provide this service.

Cowley chooses to select Angus bulls on his own; he has spent time choosing

seedstock suppliers for this need, and makes his selections from two or three operations in the Western states.

He uses mostly long yearlings, and is definitely interested in complete data.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA CATTLEMAN

Jack Cowley believes that the collection and study of carcass data has made him a better cattleman. Cowley recalls that he was "shocked" the first time he went into the Harris Ranch plant to find out that only 30% of his cattle quality graded Choice. During the last 12 years, he's made "huge improvements" in his herd's genetic progress, he says, with 92% of his cattle now grading Choice or better.

"I look at the whole picture," he says, EPDs for birth, weaning and yearling weights, milk production and carcass traits — not just for marbling, but ribeye size, too. His goal is to keep ribeyes in the 13- to 13.5-square-inch range so

they meet both packaging and consumer specifications.

"I don't want to get ribeyes too big for the marketplace," he explains. "We're trying to design the beef so consumers get what they want."

He further explains that he and his sons have developed a rating system where they crunch all of the EPDs of potential herd sires prior to a sale to see how they shake out. "All I have to do when I go to the sale is make sure he looks like a real bull," Cowley remarks.

He says, first and foremost, females are the most important part of the breeding assessment.

"The steers are the byproducts," he relays. "You have to build a better cow herd, so I always look first to build the cows, so that all of my replacement females are better than their mothers were."

"I want the cattle to be fast-growing," he continues, adding that his goal is to turn one generation of steers into quality beef by 16 months of age.

"I want to produce the very best I can possibly produce. I don't just want to raise cows. I want to raise improved superior cows, and I want to turn that generational interval as quickly as I possibly can so that every generation is better than the last."

Cowley strives to produce steer calves that grade Choice or better. Ultimately, his goal is to get 100% to grade Choice-plus or Prime. He's not there yet, he says, but that's his target because it benefits both he and the processor, which, in this case, is Harris Ranch Beef Co.

Located in Selma, a short hour's drive from the feedlot, all Harris Ranch beef is processed and marketed here. This plant

harvests about 900-1,000 head of cattle weekly. Every couple of years Cowley travels south to Selma when his cattle are harvested and takes his place on the grading line.

“I like to watch the process, because it’s part of my education,” he remarks, one that’s been a “heck of a” education at that, he says.

Cowley relates that the cooperation between himself, the feedlot and processor “just makes a nice symbiotic relationship. The better we can make it for them, obviously the better they can be for us. They’re willing to pay me for providing them a better product.”

### A first-class partner

Cowley Family Ranch’s base commercial herd is Angus and will continue to be Angus, Cowley says. They are also doing some limited crossbreeding now to introduce hybrid vigor, in order to further improve fertility and growth in their cattle.

They’re also working hard on docility, as research has proven that docile cattle yield more tender beef.

“The Angus breed has come a long ways now, because they have an EPD for docility,” he points out, “and I do look at that.”

He adds, “It’s an exciting time to be in the cattle business, not only because of what we’ve done in the past, but all of the new DNA technology that is about

to emerge. We are going to be able to change these animals very rapidly.”

Cowley is not only proud of the progress his family’s herd has made since they’ve been involved with Harris Ranch, but is proud to be part of an alliance with a family-owned, fully integrated beef company that is passionate about doing things right, from the ranch to the table.

“They are first-class, all the way,” Cowley assures, from their cattle-transport drivers to the trademark light blue and white Freightliners that come north to pick up the Cowley calves.

“These aren’t just cattle trucks, they’re Harris trucks,” he says. Even people in his hometown recognize these trucks when they roll into Montague en route to the Cowley ranch.

Harris Ranch takes great pride in producing fine beef, but also in owning and operating its own trucking fleet.

“We control hauling the cattle from the ranch to the feedlot and from the feedlot to the processing plant,” relays Ken Zeman of Harris Ranch Feeding Co. “Not a lot of companies can say that. Mr. Wood, our chairman, loves trucks. Our trucks are our billboard.”

He adds, “We have guys who have driven for us for 30 years,” and all are trained in humane livestock handling.

“The truck drivers are well-trained, first-class people,” Cowley assures. “It’s not just because they are first-class.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HARRIS RANCH

Angus-sired calves produced by Cowley Family Ranch, Montague, Calif., have been fed and processed as part of the Harris Ranch PQ program since the late 1990s. Pictured here are Barbara Cowley (second from right) with Brian and Diane Cowley and family.

It shows that they care — the whole company, every last person.”

Being a part of something done this well not only gives Cowley a sense of pride, but also a belonging in the cattle business.

“I’m not just a cow-calf producer —

I’m part of a whole process. Getting the carcass data back, you see it from start to finish, and it’s an incentive for me to do a better job, too.”



**Editor’s Note:** A field editor for the Angus Journal, Kim Holt is a freelancer out of Caldwell, Idaho.