

The Best Plans Can Change

Family changes estate plan to better fit the needs of their family and operation.



Donnie and Tammy Lawson, and Kay Leigh, Jeremy and Tucker Fisher specialize in cattle production at Lawson Land Co. LLC.

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2011 kicked off some busy years for the Lawson family. That was the year daughter Kay Leigh returned full-time to the family farm and commercial cattle operation after being away at Purdue University. She joined parents Donnie and Tammy Lawson, uncle Danny Lawson and cousin Ben, who was also just returning from Purdue. The brothers began farming at the Thorntown, Ind., operation decades earlier with their parents. As the family grew, so did Lawson Farms LLC, eventually farming 3,500 acres, calving 100 cows and feeding more than 300 fat cattle annually.

With the passing of their parents in 1998, the brothers knew that plans should be laid to prepare the operation and their families for a positive transition. With Kay Leigh coming back and Ben returning to his own operation, they decided to separate Lawson Farms LLC in 2013 and create another company, Lawson Land Co. LLC.

Donnie says their interests had changed enough — Donnie and his family specializing in cattle and Danny and his family specializing in row crops — that splitting Lawson

Farms LLC made sense. It would make for easier transitions as more family members became involved.

This isn't to say the brothers, or even the cousins, don't get along, but it takes a wise person to know when best to mix business and family. Tammy notes, "Communication is always key. The more people who are involved, the more challenges develop."

Even with the financial and structural split, the families still coordinate services and support, trading equipment and custom services to best accommodate their operations' needs. The brothers lean on each other, but without the added burden of running one business together. The cousins now have the flexibility to pursue their own goals while juggling their own growing families. The big decision has paid off, and all are on track for a successful future.

Kay Leigh and her husband, Jeremy Fisher, married in 2013 and both work full-time at Lawson Land Co. LLC. They own cattle and land and are developing an excavation service. Additionally, in 2015 their family grew with son Tucker.

Tammy and Donnie have a son, 1st Lt. Clayton Lawson, who serves in the Army in Colorado. Should he want to come back to Lawson Land Co., this new structure would ensure a place for him.

Restructuring is one challenge, but bringing in the next generation is a whole other issue. How would the operation support more than one family?

Feeding growth

At the same time they changed the operation's business layout, the Lawsons were breaking ground on a new covered monoslope feedlot. They had been doing research on it for years, and broke ground in late

2012. The first cattle went in the building in early 2014.

The timing of the feedlot was difficult, with cattle prices at record highs in 2014 and margins low for feedlot operators. Donnie says, "The timing of it was just something we had to deal with; we were committed before the prices changed."

Tammy continues, "Everything is cyclical, so do you get in when it's high or when it's low? We were still producing cattle when we were





Left: Lawsons sell all of their row crops except for keeping some silage. They source byproducts like hominy, wet gluten and balancing pellets.

Right: They've seen time and time again that well-managed cattle — those that have been weaned, vaccinated and acclimated to people — are worth the investment.



building the building, so really, we were just re-upping our commitment.”

She adds that when they started farming in 1985, the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) reported that 600 crop acres were needed to support a family. Then it increased to 1,200, and now it's closer to 1,500 acres. Competition for ground is vigorous. For the money it took to build the monoslope building, she says it would have equated to about 80 acres of crop ground at current prices, and that certainly wasn't enough to support another family.

Donnie explains that they had been feeding cattle in old barns. Ventilation was poor, and manure management was laborious.

While there are less-expensive options, they decided on a monoslope building because of greater building longevity. Monoslope barns provide better natural ventilation, sunlight, shade and shelter from the elements, like Indiana's average 40 inches of rainfall.

Keeping the building filled with cattle has been a challenge due to the needed capital, but the monoslope building has helped them expand their own operation. They can develop their own heifers and bulls in the pens. They are able to control the diet carefully. Kay Leigh says the building has been beneficial for the replacement heifers especially. Their conception rates have improved dramatically.

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Kay Leigh's specialty since returning has been improving the cow herd's genetics and performance. She enjoys studying the expected progeny differences (EPDs) of the family's original commercial Simmental herd and adding in Angus. She uses artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET) to hasten that genetic progress.

She went to school for agricultural education, but decided teaching wasn't for her and saw there was an opportunity to come back to the operation. She had always enjoyed the cattle side of things growing up, and this lets her still be involved with the cattle as her main focus.

She says she likes to stick with

purebreds and registers those calves with both associations, or produces F₁ crosses with their Angus and Simmental cattle. She has seen some trouble when there are too many crosses, and she has more control when using the two breeds, chosen to accentuate their terminal and maternal characteristics.

The Simmentals bring docility and she uses them as the terminal cross. However, the Angus bring consistency to the package. She notes that she's bred an Angus bull to a wide range of their Simmental cows and has had more-uniform calves from the mating. She also appreciates that the Angus can moderate the Simmentals' size, and the smooth Angus hair slicks off sooner in the hot and humid Indiana summers.

They have spring- and fall-calving herds, and feed their own calves. They also have a growing replacement-heifer market. High calf prices have created more cattlemen in the area, and that increased demand has resulted in more business for them.

Donnie says in 1985, they usually bought one bull and kept him for as long as they could. Now, much more thought goes into matings, and bulls get switched out more often. They have an ongoing goal to keep improving the cow herd with Kay Leigh at the helm. Disposition and production data weigh heavily in decisions, and she isn't afraid to objectively cull nonperformers.

Feeding their own calves gives them a unique perspective and learning advantage in improving the herd.

Lessons learned

Managing a feedlot has been — and will continue to be — a constant learning process. They have good standing relationships with their nutritionist and veterinarian. They also see the value of good management and genetic selection prior to feeding. Tammy says genetics play a large part in the consistency and performance of feedlot cattle.

Kay Leigh adds, "We're seeing that good-performing feedlot animals are just as well-bred as breeding stock."

They've seen time and time again that well-managed cattle — those that have been weaned, vaccinated and acclimated to people — are worth the investment.

"We don't buy high-risk cattle. Sometimes it's hard to resist those cheap sale-barn cattle, but we're hoping if people stop buying them, maybe they'll stop producing them," Tammy opines.

Kay Leigh and Donnie add that they prefer calves that have not been creep-fed. From their experience, creep-fed calves start out too fat and too timid, so they don't have the drive to get to the bunk. They've noticed that creep-fed calves stay in the feedlot longer.

They also run into the challenge of small loads when obtaining cattle. Mixing pens can lead to health problems. A few cooperatives try to form bigger loads of cattle, but these only work if the same health protocols are followed before arriving at the feedlot. They chalk it up to a learning experience. Donnie says every day is a learning experience, no matter how long someone is in the business.

Kay Leigh started her own freezer-beef company while in high school, and that has grown a bit since she came back to the operation. Through the freezer-



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influence consumers, it could be filled with a negative experience or situation. We enjoy reaching out and educating people, and feel like it's our responsibility to do so. Organizations like NCBA or the Cattlemen's Beef Board provide great tools and opportunities. They make it easy," Donnie says.

They frequently have consumer groups visit the farm and highlight that it

is a family operation, like many others in agriculture. They say working together as a family is one of the biggest benefits of a family operation, though at times it can also be the biggest challenge. Being smart enough to know how a family works best together, and how it doesn't, has been a major contributor to their success.



beef business and the feedlot business, they have a good relationship with a local processing plant. Tammy notes that processors can vary as much as different cattle operations in quality, and a good relationship is important.

Their freezer-beef customers give feedback that they want smaller, but thicker steaks. Tammy also notes that moderation in size is important, and genetics play into that. It's much more affordable for customers to buy a half or quarter of a 1,200-pound Prime or Choice carcass.

They have seen firsthand the demand for Angus, and even Angus confusion. Due to the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, Angus is synonymous with quality, but many customers don't understand the difference between CAB and the "Angus burger" at fast-food restaurants. Kay Leigh says a benefit of the freezer-beef business is the closer relationship with the customers. If her customers ask questions, she's willing to take the time to answer them.

"The beauty of CAB is that high water raises all ships. It's given an elevated awareness of what good beef should be," Tammy says.

All the Lawsons are committed to advocating for the beef industry and agriculture in general. Both Donnie and Tammy have had numerous positions off the farm.

Tammy advises, "In all of my jobs off the farm, I embraced the personal development, not just to supplement our income. I encourage young people not to just look at salary and benefits, but look at the opportunities for relationships."

Every opportunity Tammy has had (ranging from a grain merchandiser to the soybean checkoff to Purdue Extension to USDA Farm Service Agency to the Indiana State Department of Agriculture) has stemmed from something or someone she met when outside of her comfort zone. She advises, if you're in a rut, then volunteer or work somewhere that stretches your skills, presents new experiences and opens new doors.

They are both involved in many national and state industry organizations like Farm Bureau, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), and Indiana Cattlemen's Beef Association. Both have served in leadership positions in organizations and encourage young people to get involved.

"If we're not there to positively