

CAB Annual Conference **2007** Celebrating Vision & Commitment

# Top Performers

*At its annual conference, the CAB program honored feedlots and cow herds that excelled in their commitment to the brand.*

Story & photos by  
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## **Feedlot Partner of the Year 15,000-head capacity and above**

Southern Angus cattle are good and getting better, according to Don McCasland. The Texas Cattle Feeders Association (TCFA) chairman should know. He and his son Stacy have fed thousands of them.

The McCaslands own and manage the 32,000-head Wheeler Feed Yard, located west of its namesake town in the Texas Panhandle. The company became a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) licensee five years ago and was named 2007 CAB Feedlot Partner of the

Year for those with at least 15,000-head capacity.

Stacy says all of the feedlot's ranching customers "want higher quality in the meat."

But cow-calf producers make up a very small portion of the base, so the McCaslands use other means to increase placements of Angus cattle in their yard. "We have put some of our higher-volume commercial customers onto Angus," Stacy says.

Don keeps an Alabama buyer busy buying black, English heifers. "Our order is designed to bring us about 80% Angus genetics," he says.

The lightest ones go to contract growers, while the 450- to 500-pounders are shipped directly to Wheeler. They



**Don McCasland, Wheeler Feed Yard**

typically get two implants while at the feedlot, the first usually delayed until 30 days after arrival.

From January through May this year, 2,773 put-together heifers made 73%

Choice or better, with 21% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance.

"That's in a segmented industry, on sale-barn-bought blacks," Stacy points out. "No, we can't go back to exactly the

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**“[The cow-calf producer]  
can invest in proven  
Angus genetics or buy the  
neighbor’s bull that was  
supposed to be sired by a son  
of an Angus bull. There will  
be a difference in the feedlot  
and on the grid.”**

— *Don McCasland*

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same farm, because one closeout may represent more than a dozen farms. But we can buy a heifer at 475 pounds (lb.), make her weigh 1,200 pounds in seven or eight months and sell her for \$40 over the market. To us, that’s a home run.”

Don also maintains a 700-cow Brangus-based cow herd, with some of the younger females carrying an extra generation of Angus genetics. Progeny graded 88% Choice or better this year with up to 7% Prime and 35% CAB.

“We’re not breeders; we’re feeders,” he says. “All I know is, I didn’t do anything but change from Continental to Angus bulls and went from 20% Choice to 80% or 90% Choice.”

Preconditioning, good genetics, records and marketing can each add value compared to sales at weaning, Don says. “These are all profit centers, and you can quit making a profit wherever you choose.”

### **Feedlot Partner of the Year Less than 15,000-head capacity**

Doug, Dennis and Duane Beller spend each day working side by side at their family feedyard where the brothers believe work should be fun.

“Any one of us could feed cattle any day,” Doug says. “We’ve got it set up so that one man could do the whole deal.”

Dennis smirks. “That’s usually me. Those two are always gone.”

This good-natured ribbing continues from sunup to sundown. Despite the no-nonsense Beller Corp. business name, humor and family are keys to the 3,000-head, Lindsay, Neb., feedlot.

“We all grew up here on this same piece of ground,” Doug says. “We fell in love with it.”

The third-generation CAB partner yard earned recognition as the 2007 Feedlot Partner of the Year for yards with less than 15,000-head capacity.

“The Bellers work to do a better job in their business each day,” Paul Dykstra, CAB beef cattle specialist, says. “They try to start with the best cattle and work to extract the most value from each load.”

From June 2006 through May 2007, Beller Corp. posted a 19.88% CAB acceptance rate, plus 6.3% Prime.

Procuring cattle from the same annual auctions and direct sales, the brothers look for those that gain and grade.

“Usually it goes hand in hand,” Dennis says. “Performance tells you what they’ll end up doing on the rail.”

If you find cattle that can do both, there’s less need for added growth technologies, Doug says. They limit implant use to a Synovex®-S during the last 100 days on feed.

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From left, Dennis, Doug and Duane Beller, Beller Corp.



Mike Hunter, Thomas County Feeders

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Other keys are high-quality feedstuffs and a nutrition program based on history.

“We always like to find out what they’ve been on,” Duane explains. “If it’s hay, we’ll start them on hay. If they’re on a ration, we’ll keep them on that.”

Much of the feed comes from their 1,400 acres of irrigated corn and alfalfa.

“Sometimes it’s hard to find good-quality feed, but if you’re raising your own, you know the quality is there,” Doug says.

Fieldwork adds chores to the feeding operation, so the trio enrolls extra help. Brothers Darren, Dean and Dale Beller — all part owners in the corporation — help during the busy seasons. The Beller wives do office and bookwork.

It’s a family affair at Beller Corp., and the philosophy is easy to see: “A family that plays together stays together.”

## Progressive Partner of the Year

Thomas County Feeders does whatever it takes to keep cattle healthy and get them to grade, even when it means more work. That focus earned the Colby, Kan., business the 2007 CAB Progressive Partner of the Year award. Manager Mike Hunter and his crew put extra effort into everything from receiving cattle to sorting and marketing.

“Cattle are never penned unless the bunk is full of hay, the tank is cleaned and mineral is out. That gives calves a better chance at success from Day 1” Hunter says. “To recuperate from the haul, cattle get at least 24 hours before we process them.”

Special attention is part of this 18,000-head feedlot’s strategy to supply cattle for the CAB Natural brand.

Part of the Beef Marketing Group (BMG), a cooperative of 14 feedyards in Kansas and Nebraska, Thomas County and four other BMG yards are dedicated to natural beef production in an agreement with Tyson Fresh Meats. To qualify, cattle must be individually identified and never receive antibiotics, hormonal implants, ionophores or animal byproducts.

The CAB-licensed feedlot aims for at least 80% USDA Choice and 35% CAB.

“They’re looking for Angus influence and cattle that have been set up to succeed in their system,” Dykstra says, noting that Thomas County’s move to both natural and a carcass-quality focus is uncommon among yards of its size. That commitment to 100% natural production began in November 2005.

At processing, the crew palpates ears for implants and antibiotics. Data is entered and double-checked. Cattle that pass the test get electronic identification (EID) and assignment to a home pen where they stay until harvest. That is, unless they get sick.

Calves walking the tightrope between sickness and health find themselves in an observation pen where they get extra attention. “We give them every chance we can before we stick that needle in them,” Hunter says.

Cattle continuing in the natural program move up on a ration that nets 2.5 to 3 pounds (lb.) of gain per day. Months of cautious management culminate in sorting cattle for the grid.

“Sorting is the livelihood of the whole program,” Hunter says. His visual appraisal led the feedyard to an overall record of 32.3% CAB and Prime for the 2006-2007 award year. Yield grade

**“When you go from feeding a high percentage of exotic-cross cattle to feeding some of the best black-Angus cattle in the country, it’s a feeling of gratification and accomplishment.”**

— *Mike Hunter*

(YG) 4s and 5s dropped to 6.7%, about half the industry average for high-quality cattle.

“I don’t know of another feedyard in the United States that has the capacity we do that is 100% natural and black,” Hunter says, “and that’s very exciting,”

### **Quality Focus Award 15,000-head capacity and above**

Little things are important at Irsik & Doll Feedyard (IDFY), Garden City, Kan. Little things like relationships, slight variations in performance or grade, and sorting cattle to an ideal finish.

Manager Mark Sebranek knows the owners behind every partial pen in the 32,000-head CAB-licensed feedlot. Cattle come in from all over, but most are high-percentage Angus targeting the CAB brand. That’s why they come to IDFY.

That’s why the yard is a “three-peat” winner of the CAB Quality Focus Award for big feedlots (more than 15,000 head). IDFY is the only big yard to win the award, created in 2005 to showcase top CAB acceptance rates.

From June 2006 through this May, IDFY harvested 2,802 CAB-enrolled cattle that hit the target at the rate of 26.1% CAB and 3.4% USDA Prime. That was the highest combined mark for all CAB partners feeding at least 500 head. During a three-year period, more than 15,800 head achieved 26.8% CAB and Prime.

Sebranek shares the credit with assistant manager Jerry Jackson and cattle foreman Travis Pitts. “It’s their eyes,” Sebranek says, in praise of their sorting and animal husbandry skills.

The customer base shows many examples of 95% Choice and harvest groups with 50% or higher CAB acceptance. “It seems like all of our customers are after the same thing, so we kind of specialize in helping them make great cattle even better,” Sebranek says.

IDFY sorts for accurate finishing. “We’re all looking for the total package: performance, conversion and grade. Sometimes you only get two out of three,” he says. “Those that do it all can bring home \$1,400 to \$1,600 on this market, so there’s a lot of incentive.”

It’s not always about the genetics, however. Sebranek shakes his head when someone says, if an animal is not genetically bound to make Prime, you

can’t bring it up. “That’s like saying you can’t bring an animal up from Select to Choice,” Sebranek says. “What we do here with energy and protein can make a lot of difference, if they started them right.”

Most cattle get a single implant, and that may be delayed until cattle are on a full ration.

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Mark Sebranek, Irsik & Doll Feedyard





Paul and Christine Miller, Miller Cattle &amp; Feedyard LLC

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Genetics still have their place. Sebranek says that's why customers tend to send better cattle over time, as they react to feedlot and carcass data feedback.

"It's no one thing," Sebranek says. "It's everything, but mainly it's the customer. I wish we could say it's us. We just try to pick them off at the right time, with the lowest

cost of gain, get them out and make the whole thing work."

### Quality Focus Award Less than 15,000-head capacity

Paul Miller Jr. and his wife, Christine, have built a name in eastern Wyoming. The Pennsylvania natives moved to Torrington a decade ago to take over the 6,000-head operation now known as Miller Cattle & Feedyard LLC.

"We used to own more cattle," he says, "but through reputation and how well the cattle have done, we're now primarily a custom yard."

As a service to the growing customer base, Miller became CAB-licensed in 2004.

For the year ending in May, the yard posted a 28% combined USDA Prime and CAB acceptance rate. The highest CAB rate among all licensed partners feeding at least 500 head helped earn Miller the Quality Focus Award for yards with less than 15,000-head capacity.

Integrity is a primary goal. When cattlemen call to ask for projected breakevens, Miller shoots straight.

"There are all kinds of numbers you can change to make the cattle look like they'll work," he says, "but I figure them out at 'worst case.' I'd rather give a customer an honest answer and have him come back the next year in a different market than change numbers just to get him to feed."

An honest projection is just the start of the information flow. Customers get performance numbers and carcass data if they were enrolled in the CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP).

That led Torrington Angus producer Dudley Booth to feed his cattle at the local feedyard.

"We decided to use calves from our commercial herd to get data to help us sell our registered bulls," he says. "We can show feed efficiency, ability to grade and conversion on those calves."

This year the cattle graded better than 92% Choice, with 11.1% Prime and 32.5% qualifying for the CAB brand.

"Paul takes care of everybody's cattle on an individual basis," Booth says.

That starts by finding out the cattle history and coordinating health and nutrition programs. When finished, cattle are sorted and marketed to one of the four major packers viewing cattle each week. Some are eligible for source- and age-verification premiums because the feedlot became Quality Systems Assessment (QSA)-certified last November.

The Millers get a taste for what their customers want because they're customers, too. The couple and their three children operate a 300-cow operation that targets the club calf market. They feed out the animals that don't make the cut as show calves.

Miller credits most of the feedlot's success to focused effort. "We've built trust, and it's paying off," he says.

**“There are all kinds of numbers you can change to make the cattle look like they’ll work, but I figure them out at ‘worst case.’ I’d rather give a customer an honest answer and have him come back the next year in a different market than change numbers just to get him to feed.”**

— Paul Miller Jr.

### **Seedstock Commitment to Excellence**

From the oil fields to soft drink distribution, banking to ranching, Jim Ratcliff of Vinita, Okla., never set foot without a commitment to excellence. Ratcliff hired Billy Hall as ranch manager in 1999, because he saw a kindred spirit.

Together, they completely transformed Ratcliff Ranch, which first added Angus cows in the 1980s. The stocker-oriented business gave way to one based on the Angus genetics that unite producer and consumer demand.

That business won the CAB 2007 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award and now includes more than 4,000 cows, with 1,000 registered Angus. It networks with bull customers each year to place 9,000 progeny in feedlots, learning and improving with every closeout.

Since 2002, premium calves have been going to a Chappell (Neb.) Feedlot, a CAB-licensed yard owned and managed by Tom Williams. In the last two years, 800 of those were enrolled through the FLP and achieved more than 28% USDA Prime or CAB brand acceptance.

The ranch will help market all progeny of Ratcliff bulls, but demand is greater for calves with a known health protocol.

“When customers call, I tell them what we use,” Hall says. “Most of them are on the modified-live vaccines; we usually go with the Pfizer SelectVac® program, preweaning and the boosters at weaning.” That includes an injectible de-wormer before weaning “so they get that out of their systems,” he says.

Williams gets involved with Ratcliff customers, too, since he often buys a share of the calves. “Most of them can get 70% Choice; we’re working on moving that to 80% or more and keeping the growth,” he says. “Ratcliff genetics take a common-sense approach to getting there. They don’t get into high-dollar games, but their cattle are proven at every level and that’s why their customers will pay a lot for bulls.”

Only about 1,200 yearlings now graze Ratcliff pastures, and those are replacement heifers that will be artificially inseminated (AIed) for the ranch and its customers.

Some of those, along with customer cattle are featured in an annual fall commercial female sale at the Ratcliff sale barn on the north edge of town.

From seedstock through marketing

with feedlots, the entire business is built on a quality reputation.

“You don’t get but one chance,” Hall says. As a Ratcliff pledge on the company’s web site puts it, “What’s said is done.”



Billy Hall, Ratcliff Ranch