

Here to Stay

Big on scale and natural quality,
Montana's Cross Four Ranch aims high.

by **Miranda Reiman**



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

Most say natural beef is a small niche market. A decade ago, some even wondered if it was a fad, a passing fancy that wouldn't last.

Fred Wacker was not one of those people. In fact, today natural beef represents nearly the sole focus of Cross Four Ranch, the 5,000-cow commercial Angus business he runs with his family near Miles City, Mont.

"I got interested after looking at the economics of it. With commodity cattle, you're going up against every feedlot in the world and you're doing the same thing they're doing," Wacker says. "I made up my mind in the cattle business that the only place there was good money was if you're willing to do what nobody else wanted to do. Then they would pay you for it."

Although he is a fourth-generation rancher, Wacker got his start primarily by

managing stockers. For nearly 20 years he and a partner would let the near-term market decide their business plan.

"Basically everything was commodity cattle," he says. "We sold them off of grass if the market was good, and if it wasn't we fed them."

Then in the late 1990s, Wacker studied those economics and knew he wanted something more. He started looking into natural production, and four years ago he went all in, from cows to stocker customers

to finishing. They might have made the switch sooner, but it took some time to find the right outlets.

"I started with 800 or 900 natural yearlings, but nobody would give me a dime bonus for them. The packers were interested, however," Wacker says. "So I started feeding. The packers were used to killing a lot of natural cattle that were grading 60% to 70% Choice and Prime, and we came in with these northern cattle that beat 90% Choice, and that caught their eye."

The family backgrounds cattle at their 12,000-head yard, where they keep an eye on health, stress and nutrition.

"The key to the natural business is keeping them natural," Wacker says. "If you have a wreck, you wind up with a bunch of high-priced calves that become commodity feeders."

As demand escalated, they began feeding calves at Producer's Feedlot near Greeley, Colo. In addition to raising all of their Angus-based calves for the natural target, Wacker purchases thousands of natural calves each year from a regional network. Calves are all weaned and backgrounded on the ranch, too.

Cross Four has been steadily lowering the number of cattle that drop out of the program for treatment. Three years ago they

► **Above:** Brian Nowicki (left) and Shane Rehm (center) are part of the Cross Four Ranch at Miles City, Mont., with their father-in-law Fred Wacker (right), who started the family operation that now manages 5,000 commercial Angus cows and networks thousands more into an all-natural production system.

► **Right:** Mark Anderson, manager at Producer's Feedlot, says he's already impressed with the consistency and gains on the cattle, despite their natural status.



PHOTO COURTESY PAUL DYKSTRA

were at 22% fallout, compared to 11.5% last year.

“We changed the starter ration,” he says. “We changed how the cattle are handled, too, but just the little things.”

A family affair

When he says “we” he’s talking about his entire family. Working with scores of cow-calf producers and running a ranch that spans 400 square miles takes the whole crew.

Wacker’s wife, Gwen, does bookwork while daughter Sara covers the business accounting. Her husband, Shane Rehm, spends most of his time looking after the feedlot, supervising branding and moving cattle. Julie is the resident human resources guru and her husband, Brian Nowicki, is in charge of cattle tracking and receiving.

Mike and Nicole Wacker do the farming and have a livestock trucking business that helps move the cattle from ranches to the feedlot. Wacker’s youngest daughter, Karen Martin, lives in Bozeman, but helps with cattle marketing.

When he first started out, it would have been hard to imagine Cross Four at the scope it is today.

“I came out here when I was 22 with a wife, two kids, two saddle horses, a milk cow and her calf, and a crate of chickens,” Wacker says. With \$1,700 cash he built up a business that includes the ranching enterprises, and agricultural real estate and insurance agencies.

“My dad was a good rancher and he taught me to care for livestock and how to tell the good ones,” he says. Progressive thinking and industry-wide understanding help bring his cowsense in tune with seemingly natural business skills. He’s a “people person” and that helps in everything from building ranch relationships to keeping the consumer in mind.

The gold standard

“What a mother puts in her children’s mouths is sacred,” Wacker says, explaining why he thinks *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand Natural has become the “gold standard.”

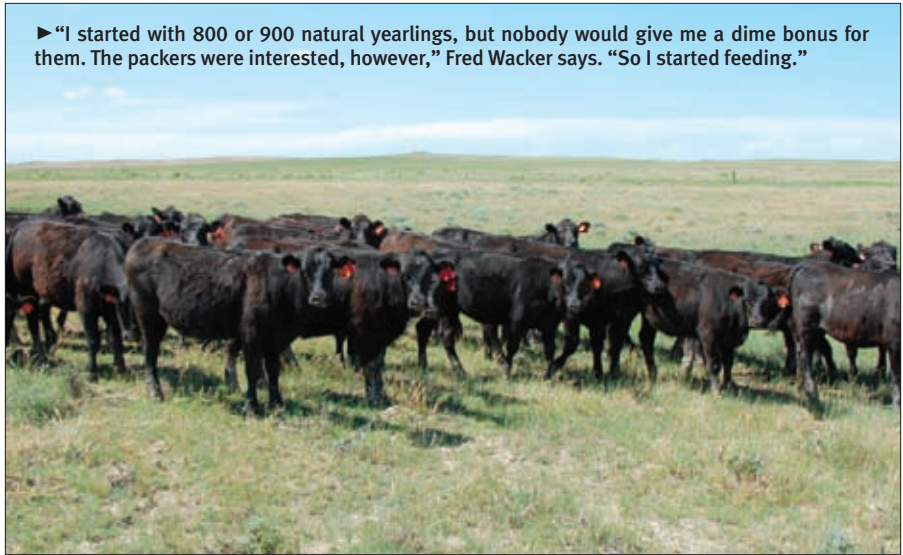
“The natural cattle are setting the feeder-calf markets here in Montana,” he says. “You’ll hear comments like, ‘Those cattle brought X-amount, and they aren’t even natural.’ That’s like saying my Hereford cattle did well and they’re not even Angus.”

He knows high-quality and natural have to be achieved in tandem.

“There isn’t a bonus on natural Select,” he says.

The cattle are targeted for several high-quality natural programs, including National Beef Packing, but just recently the ranch

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began supplying cattle for the CAB Natural brand through an agreement with Tyson Fresh Meats.

“If you take a good product and brand it with a good name and get that consistency, it will absolutely go,” Wacker says. His role in that chain is to make sure the cattle hit all the specifications, which he says is made relatively easy with access to high-quality northern genetics. Bred right and calved, they handle them easy, too, following Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) guidelines with an emphasis on weaning and preconditioning.

“Not much has changed since going all-natural, other than the buying of the calves and the recordkeeping,” Rehm says. “We just try to get the calves directly off the ranch and buy the ones with a history of good health.”

Most of those come from Montana, North Dakota and Wyoming. From the moment they get to Cross Four, Nowicki is collecting data on them.

“We’ve been putting eID (electronic identification) in all of our natural cattle for the last four years,” he says. Rehm says that helps his crew. As cattle are treated they get a “doctored” tag and that’s cross-referenced to the eID number.

“If by chance one loses a tag or gets by us, they get beeped in at the yard and Brian would know right away to keep that animal separate,” he says.

Another benefit of the computerized system is the ability to keep history and provide producer reports.

“We track that through a software program and use it to identify groups of cattle that perform better than others,” Nowicki says. They keep records from death loss to fallout rates, from gains to grades, and then share it with the cow-calf producers.

“If we can provide more information back to them, then we make the beef industry that much better,” he says.

Calves from their own herd often reach levels of 80% CAB and above, and they’d like to keep their ranch suppliers improving to that level.

Mark Anderson, manager at Producer’s Feedlot, says he’s already impressed with the consistency and gains on the cattle, despite their natural status.

“They’re always looking for cattle with the better genetics, and that’s important,” he says. “When you’re pulling ionophores and implants, we have to have the cattle with the better genetics to make up some of that difference in feed performance.”

Anderson says history helps provide predictability, too.

“They have a pretty good database for how the cattle will feed and kill because they’ve been doing it for quite some time now,” he says.

Many are return sellers who had worked with Wacker long before he got into natural, but the Cross Four crew is always looking to add new Angus-based producers to their network.

“We have found a lot of people fit with what we’re doing,” Sara Rehm says. “The source- and age-verified paperwork has been the biggest step for them. The all-natural was not a problem.”

Luckily for the producers, they have an entire family ready to help them document what they’ve already been doing.

“They’re hands-on and involved every day,” Anderson says. “It doesn’t matter who you talk to, they know their business. They understand cattle and they believe in the natural program.”

That vision may have come from Wacker, but many consumers are sure to benefit from the dedication of everyone at Cross Four — and that’s not a fad. It’s a long-established tradition.

