

Climbing to the Top

McPherson County Feeders Inc. wins 2010 Feedlot Partner of the Year
for feedlots with fewer than 15,000 head.

Story & photos by **Lyndee Patterson**

Success is not a summit at the top of some mountain, but rather the continuous process of climbing that hill.

Allan Sents, owner and manager of McPherson County Feeders Inc. (MCF), near Marquette, Kan., faces the uphill journey every day. In 1981 he joined his father and other local investors to purchase the yard that he and wife Deanna now own as sole proprietors.

MCF became a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed partner with the first wave in 1999, enrolling more than 73,700 cattle in the Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP) since then. Overall, those cattle have achieved a 19.4% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand and USDA Prime qualification rate. But quality has improved. Last year, the 6,408 enrolled cattle made 31% CAB and Prime.

During the year following the 2009 recognition of MCF office manager Dara Dix as CAB Quality Assurance Officer of the Year, and the 10-year recognition and the Silver Award in the CAB 30.06 Program, Sents appreciated the publicity. But he just kept climbing those hills.

This year MCF won the CAB Feedlot Partner of the Year Award for feedlots with less than 15,000-head capacity for the second time since 2005. The Sents's traveled this fall to the annual CAB conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to accept the award.

Involved with customers

Being a CAB partner offers MCF much more than another plaque for the wall.

"One of the benefits is the ability to be more involved with customers and make their programs more valuable," Sents says. "Not only do they get the premiums when they make grid sales, but they can use our data to advance their herds."

A recent addition to the team, assistant manager Landon Shaw finds the customer relations plan a refreshing change from the corporate environment he knew in a Texas company before coming to McPherson County.

"It feels more like a family farm here," he says. "We know all of our customers by name.



► The closeouts and harvest reports Vince Bengston (left) gets from Allan Sents' (right) McPherson County Feeders and CAB help him make improvements in herd management, whether making a modification to his feed ration or changing the way he selects and manages cattle.

We recognize their voices when they call, and we stay in touch with what's going on in their operations and how that applies to us."

Vince Bengston, Windom, Kan., started finishing and selling his cattle on a grid through MCF a decade ago as an alternative to selling calves at auction, and he's been a customer there ever since.

"We first sent them to Allan so we could get all the data back to make improvements," Bengston says. After just one year, he and his brother found it an easy decision to keep feeding at MCF.

The closeouts and harvest reports Bengston gets from the feedlot and CAB help with those improvements. He uses them in all aspects big or small, whether making a modification to his feed ration or changing the way he selects and manages cattle.

"Before coming to the feedyard, I used what my dad and FFA taught me about conformity and eye appeal to determine my cattle selections," he says. "Now they have to

fit the criteria on paper before I even start judging them based on looks."

While Sents wants to help ranchers make genetic advancements, he is always looking for ways to improve his cattle feeding techniques as well. That's an advantage to being a CAB partner.

"We've been working with Gary Fike, beef specialist with CAB, on researching implant programs — studying their effects on performance, quality grade and profitability," Sents says.

This year Bengston allowed Sents to use some of his cattle in those trials. "When they come up here, I trust him," Bengston says. "He's made me money in the past, and I'm willing to follow his lead on what he wants to do."

Publicity is another benefit MCF has reaped through the CAB program. Producers are more aware of the yard because of the awards it has won. One new customer from Kentucky is a direct result of that attention.

“Our location can be very helpful for producers sending their cattle from places like Missouri or Kentucky,” Shaw says. “We can save them a lot of money on freight because they don’t have to go all the way to western Kansas.”

“We’re far enough east to have adequate moisture to grow abundant, low-cost feed, and far enough west to have a decent climate,” Sents says. Sitting on the edge of the Flint Hills puts the yard relatively close to both stocker operations and packers.

There are other resources and services customers can tap into at MCF. “For customers who are interested, we can work to protect or manage their risk,” Sents says.

That aspect of the business has been a learning experience for Shaw. “When I started, I was a novice at risk management,” he says. Now more seasoned, and with Sents’ interaction, he sees this service as a growth area for their customers.

Adjusting to challenges

In the five years since MCF last won this CAB award, Sents has kept improving cattle and results, but the process has had its share of setbacks.

“We’re trying to be more aggressive sorting cattle to maximize the value on the grid,” he says. However, the Choice-Select spread has narrowed, decreasing the economic incentive for such practices.

It is a concern for Sents. “Is that a short-term phenomenon, or are there enough cattle grading that it’s going to stick with us in the long term, and how do we adjust to that?” he wonders. Unfortunately, it will take time to answer those questions.

Also in the last five years, the yard has had to adjust to one big challenge: the closing of the Emporia, Kan., Tyson plant that had been the primary market for MCF cattle.

“That older, smaller plant was equipped to handle smaller groups of cattle, and we could sort more aggressively with them,” Sents says.

Most of the large plants out west won’t kill less than a load, so they can’t market the partial loads there. Still, Sents and Shaw are adjusting.

“We’ve had to do more tag transfers, and use them to break out the ownership,” Sents says. “It works OK, and we’re still adapting. The downside is, there are more possibilities for errors in this process.”

Shaw’s college livestock judging experience has also proven useful for dealing with these sorting issues. “We try to catch them at the optimal stage,” he says. “But with the packer-buyers enforcing the need for larger loads, it

puts more pressure on us to sort at the right time to hit certain numbers.”

“It’s a great advantage to have another set of eyes,” Sents says. “It allows for more awareness of how the cattle are performing and for reaching an optimum target.”

They have had to watch the cattle especially close this spring.

“Our general grade percentage has improved this past year, and we’ve only had 5% to 6% Yield Grade (YG) 4s,” Sents says. But recovery from a rough winter allowed the cattle to perform better, and without careful observation and reaction, they would have had more cattle over the line.

“We want to minimize the discounts and the cost of gain for our customers as well as ourselves, so we try to get them sent before they reach that point,” Shaw says.

Their customers can help them in this process. “We can effectively sort cattle based on fat and keep them out of the YG 4 category,” Sents says. But they’ve found that cattle over the line are often the ones that are too lightly muscled. They pass that information back to customers so they can use it to improve the cattle that will come to the feedyard in the future.

For a feedyard to continue to grow and prosper, everyone working there must really care about the animals, employ effective business strategies and remain open to new ideas that can improve the operation.

As a new addition to the team, Shaw hopes he can bring a new perspective to the yard.

“It’s a testament to Allan and his continued success that a lot of the ideas I mention, he has already thought about at one time,” he says. “Together we’re able to bring some of those ideas to the front burner and implement them.”

“Landon has helped us add to what we’ve been doing in the past,” Sents says. “With his contributions, we’ve been able to get a little better situated.”

In the coming years Sents wants the percentage of customers focused on Angus genetics to increase. “It’s a little more exciting and challenging to handle cattle that have more value potential and then be able to give customers that feedback.”

“I think producers are really starting to realize the benefit of the CAB program,” Shaw says. “Hopefully the quality of cattle that people send us to feed will continue to improve.”

Cow herd improvement was the reason Bengston started feeding at MCF, and it is one of the many reasons he continues to do so today. “I’ve been working pretty hard on building a high-quality herd, and with Allan’s help we’re getting there.”

Sents plans to keep on helping customers climb their hills, and with his management, McPherson County Feeders is on track to maintain its progress on that successful, upward journey.



Editor’s Note: Lyndee Patterson is industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.



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