

# Average Isn't Good Enough

Nebraska feedlot supplies CAB® Natural brand.

Story & photos by *Miranda Reiman*

**A**lthough natural programs have been around for decades, this century has really brought them into the consciousness of the mainstream ranching public.

Astute cattlemen who want natural premiums might realize that aligning with a specific program makes their calves more marketable. *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) Natural is the highest quality target for commercial Angus producers, but to be considered, cattle must go to a feeder who sells to one of the brand's two natural-licensed packers: Tyson Fresh Meats or Niman Ranch.

Weborg Feeding Co., Pender, Neb., is one of around a dozen that supply Tyson with naturally raised cattle for the CAB brand.

"We've handled and sorted enough natural cattle that we've got a pretty good feel for hand sorting and delivering the right product to the packer that's going to fit the program," says Kent Weborg, second-generation feeder and manager of the family-owned operation. His son Tyler now handles most of the paperwork for their "specialty" markets, including natural, non-hormone-treated, and source- and age-verified cattle.

They've been feeding natural cattle since the mid-1990s, but this new working relationship with Tyson developed in the last year.

"I went through the list of those feeding commercial cattle for us and picked out who was doing the best job," Brad Brandenburg, Tyson's director of cattle procurement, says. "Then I limited it to who I wanted to work with on our natural program."

Weborg stood out because of the well-kept facilities at the 20,000-head feedlot and something more.

"The family really does believe in the Angus breed — that it offers a superior product — so it's nice to get that mind-set to start with," Brandenburg says. Plus, they have all that experience. "It does take a while to understand that there is a big difference in feeding generic cattle and natural cattle."

## A learning experience

When the family first started trying to



► Kent (left) and Tyler (right) Weborg of Weborg Feeding Co., Pender, Neb., help supply Tyson with naturally raised cattle for the CAB brand.

grow their expertise in natural feeding, Tyler says they spent a good deal of "windshield time" traveling throughout the state educating order buyers and cow-calf producers on what cattle fit.

"After a few years of that you get repeat customers," he says. The Weborgs also look to the AngusSource® listing and other services that alert them when natural, age-

and source-verified cattle are up for sale. They call themselves a full-service feedyard, working with investors and retained ownership customers, as well as feeding cattle they purchase.

Historically, the feedyard has had as much as 70% of its inventory in natural cattle, but today it is somewhere in the 25% range. Those cattle stay in a separate part of the feedlot

where all are clearly identified with both individual and lot tags signifying their status. Natural cattle often come in with electronic identification (eID), which the Weborgs not only read, but cross-reference to another five-digit tag for backup.

"We've been doing it so long, it's become more of a routine," Kent says. "Everyone

knows what they have to do with natural cattle. We have good, long-term employees with lots of knowledge." That minimizes the need for training, he notes.

"The cattle are handled exactly the same except they don't get hormones or antibiotics," Tyler says. If they're sick, though, they're pulled and treated, falling out of the program and moved to another pen.

"We're just trying to do what's best for the cattle and maintain the best return on them at the same time," Kent says.

At harvest time Tyler gets the paperwork requested by the packer, working with the feedyard's process-verified-program (PVP) provider, IMI Global. He often sends carcass and performance data back to their rancher customers.

"A lot of times, producers will want to follow that animal through the packing plant," Tyler says. "They'll get grading data and maybe change a bull or two or disperse some cows."

Scott Peterson, manager of Lone Creek Cattle Co., has fed 1,000 head per year with the family since 2007. He appreciates the feedback.

"They do a good job of handling that data and transferring it back and forth so we can make better management decisions," he says.

The ranch has nearly 4,000 cows at several

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locations, primarily in Cherry County, Neb., and all are geared toward the natural target.

"It fits with our long-term, value-added goal," Peterson says. "We own cattle from birth to kill, so we want to extract as much premium out of the market as is available."

He completed a feedlot tour a few years ago and found Weborg aligned with those objectives.

"We base our program on nutrition, cattle handling, genetics, vaccination programs and environmental control," Peterson says. "They allow us to do a good job of hitting our nutrition targets and maintaining environmental control, and they also handle the cattle well."

Cattle from Lone Creek's herd, which is three-quarters Angus, typically grade about

95% Choice, with 7% yield grade (YG) 4s.

Since most of the programs, including CAB Natural, pay premiums based on grading data, it's important for the Weborgs to get all the quality they can out of an animal, regardless of ownership.

### Shooting for high marks

"We don't want to be satisfied with average; we want to shoot for the high marks," Kent says.

The family also has farm ground where they raise corn, soybeans and alfalfa. Tyler says that philosophy spills over into every aspect of the business.

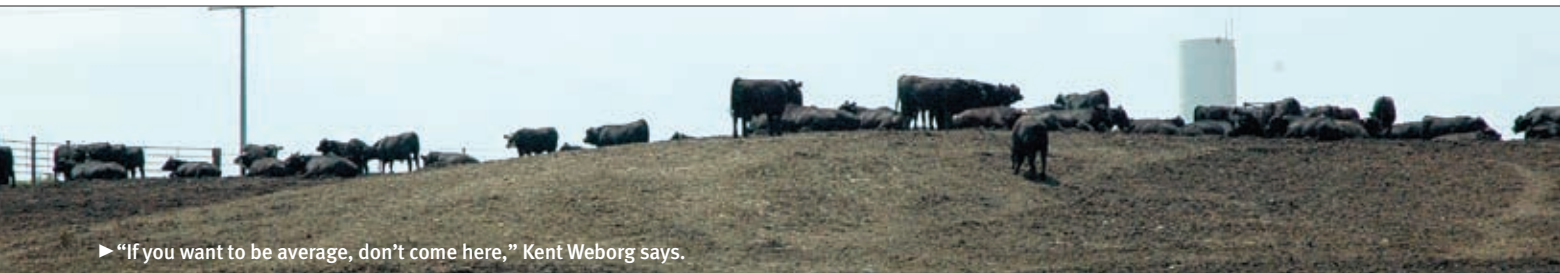
"We're always looking for different technology, new hybrids and different ideas that we can bring to the table," he says.

"We're always looking for a better way to do things."

They get outside consulting help from a veterinarian, nutritionist, agronomist and accountant, but within the family they each have specialties, as well. One of Kent's brothers does the farming, while another manages animal health and accounting. Kent's younger son Tony and some of his nephews run the hospital, help out with farming and maintain equipment.

"We all have areas we take care of, but we discuss parts of it," Kent says. "We have meetings on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and all of our key people are there. We strive, and want our employees to strive to do the best job they can."

"If you want to be average, don't come here," he adds. That's probably a message that fits well for potential employees and customers alike.



► "If you want to be average, don't come here," Kent Weborg says.