

CAB Featured Feedlot series:

# Working for a Living

The Wilkes spend time with cattle, crops and family.

Story & photos by *Miranda Reiman*



►The Wilkes licensed their feedlot through CAB in 2003. “We did that to get help in getting carcass data,” Paul says, noting they share information with customers, regardless of ownership.

The Wilke family has a hard time planning big events like weddings or vacations because their diversified crop and livestock farm keeps them busy year-round.

“We don’t have an off time of the year,” says Paul Wilke, who farms with his wife, Keri, and brother, David, near Columbus, Neb. Paul lives on the “home place” where Keri keeps the operation’s books and an eye on their four children: a 12-year-old son and 9-year-old triplets.

Perhaps in the agricultural field their schedule is not unique, but as they juggle it all, they also have their sights on what packers and, ultimately, beef consumers demand from them.

Their focus is the 3,000-head custom feedlot and 180-cow herd, but the business also includes 2,000 acres of mostly irrigated cropland and three swine finishing barns. Their dad always fed cattle, but that enterprise received greater focus when Paul started full-time involvement after high school graduation. At the same time, they

started a cow herd, which once numbered close to 500 head.

“We grow all of our own hay, silage and corn. The cattle give us an opportunity to market our corn without having to haul it any place,” Paul says.

## Partnering for data

In 2003, just a few years after David’s graduation from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), the Wilkes expanded to their current feedlot capacity and reduced cow numbers. The family licensed with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) the same year.

“We did that to get help in getting carcass data,” Paul says, noting they share information with customers, regardless of ownership. At any given time they claim 40%-50% of the cattle in their yard.

“We try to own a portion of them ourselves, so it spreads our risk out a little bit,” Paul says. Investors “partner” on loads,

and a handful of local customers retain ownership.

Information flows both ways between the ranchers and the feeders, since the Wilkes often ask for help qualifying calves for source- and age-verified programs.

“If a customer knows they’re going to get some carcass data back, they’re pretty easy to work with,” Paul explains. The family uses the Samson LLC process-verified program (PVP).

The Wilkes were one of the first to sell on the Angus America grid, and now almost all cattle are marketed based on carcass merit, so one premium they are constantly monitoring is the amount paid for source- and age-verified cattle at local packers.

“If we could do one thing, I would like them to set a price for source and age,” Paul says. “We forward-contract cattle, but we can’t forward contract [source- and age-verified] premiums.”

It’s hard for the feeders to know what type





►Left: “We grow all of our own hay, silage and corn,” says Paul Wilke. “The cattle give us an opportunity to market our corn without having to haul it any place.”

►Right: It’s good to be involved in both the cow-calf sector and the feeding sector, says David Wilke. “You understand how important the health and condition of the cows are, because if you don’t take care of the cows, the calves won’t have the immune system they should have.”



of bonus to pay their suppliers when they’re not sure if a premium will even exist when they sell finished cattle, Paul says.

At least, David says, “If you’re familiar with the programs, it’s pretty easy to do.” All of the family’s calves are source- and age-verified.

The Wilkes often use this experience in both the cow-calf and feeding segments to help explain the harvest summaries to producers.

“A lot of people who have never fed before have never seen data like that,” David says.

### Interconnected

“It is good to be on both sides of it,” he adds. “You understand how important the health and condition of the cows are, because if you don’t take care of the cows, the calves won’t have the immune system they should have.”

Tracking history allows them to be more selective in procurement.

“There are groups that we used to get that we just don’t anymore because of performance and health problems,” Paul says.

They’ve also learned some industry stereotypes don’t hold up when looking at hard numbers.

“We get a few pens here and there out of the Southeast, and the cattle have always graded well,” David says. Last year a group of Kentucky calves went 89% Choice and 23% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)

“They graded and gained as good as a lot of the calves we get out of the Sandhills,” Paul says. “They were just sourced through an order buyer, but we try to buy good cattle even when we go through those guys.”

Those Southeast cattle make up a large percentage of the summer inventory; calves from the Sandhills and surrounding states arrive in the fall.

### At the bunk

“They’ve got to have their preconditioning shots at the ranch,” Paul says, adding that’s not an issue now. “Then we’ll work them again when we get them.”



►The Wilkes feed a finishing ration that includes both wet and dried distillers’ grains.

Next, it’s on to a starter ration until they reach 800 pounds (lb.), and then a finishing ration that includes both wet (WDG) and dried distillers’ grains (DDG).

“We started feeding it as soon as the plant came to Columbus (Neb.), back 10 or 15 years ago. I’d hate to go without it now,” Paul says. It started as a cost advantage, but now it closely mirrors corn price.

“It’s almost the same price, but you have to take in the added effects of a nicer ration, less starch and less acidosis problems,” David says. “Plus, the cattle love to eat it.”

It works especially well since the feedlot is nicely situated close to several ethanol plants.

“That’s our biggest advantage; we’re located close to corn. We’re close to packers and close enough to feeder calves, too,” Paul says.

Of course, some of that nearby corn is their own, adding just one more task to an already stacked to-do list. They hire consulting help for the crops, cattle nutrition and marketing to get an outside perspective and simply to help them get it all done.

This year they’ll squeeze in one of those big events. They are hoping for an early harvest, as David is planning a wedding with fiancée Julie Benesh.

It’ll be a day to celebrate, then they’ll go back to work, because there are cattle to feed and chores to be done.

