

Natural Beef

Enhancing value through
natural beef programs.

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Confusion surrounds the word *natural*, especially when used in conjunction with production agriculture. The meaning is often lost in translation between producers, feeders, packers, consumers and the media.

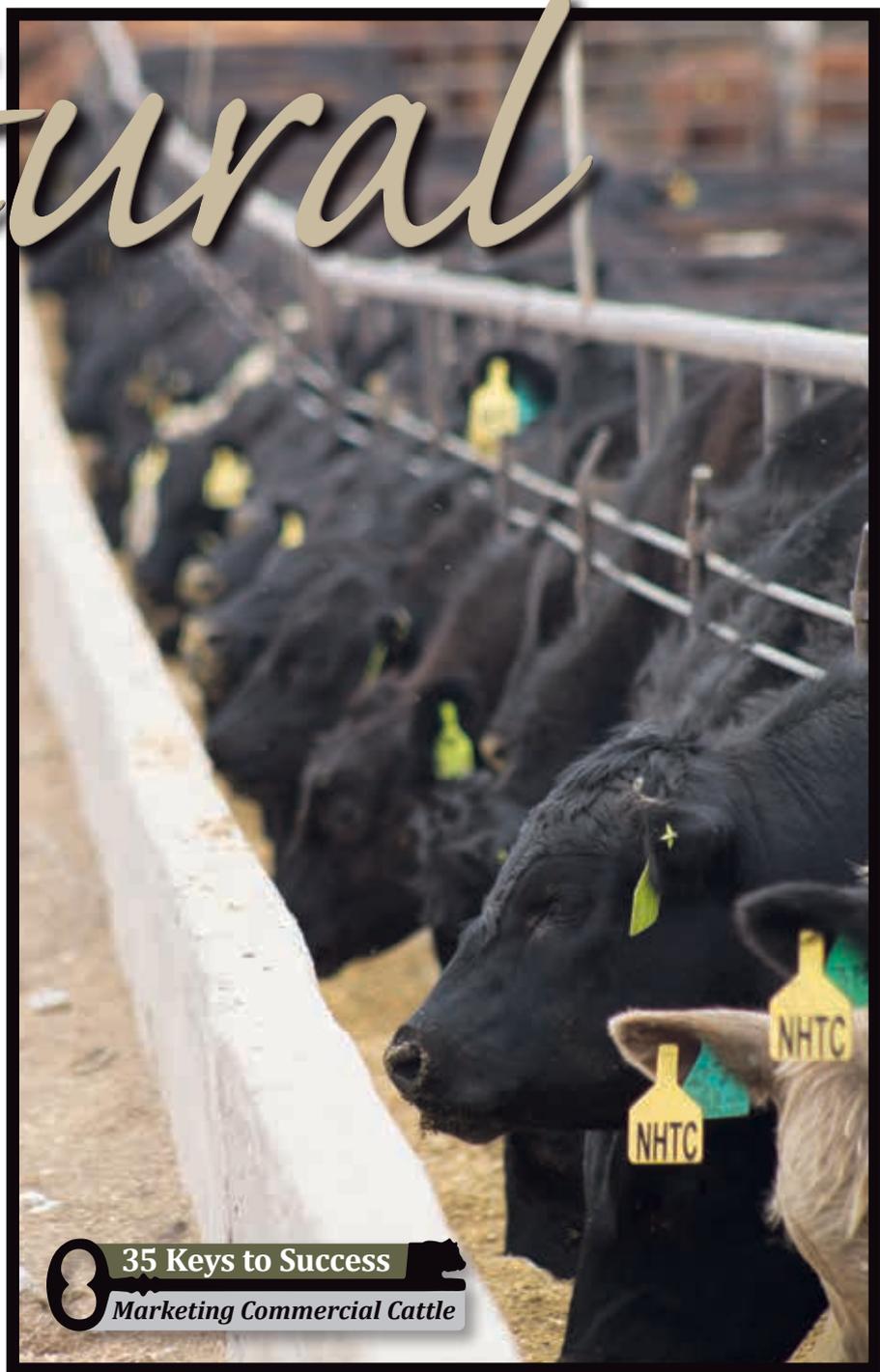
As consumers begin to question the origin of their food and the stories of those who produced it, demand and premiums associated with natural programs rise. For some producers, natural could become synonymous with profit.

“Natural is minimally processed with only natural ingredients — but at the point that it becomes a carcass,” said Cara Gerken, program auditor with IMI Global. “When people think of natural, they all see it differently. The reality is that it depends on the program.”

IMI Global, a third-party auditor and division of Where Food Comes From Inc., qualifies producers for value-added programs, including natural, organic and grass-fed.

“Whatever the consumer wants, we have the flex and intuitive ability to provide that to them,” Gerken said. “While I am with a client, we will cover everything from feed to the packaged product in order to enable them to meet USDA and customer requirements.”

A few of the more commonly recognized programs are the Global Animal Partnership Standards (GAP) and Non-Hormone Treated Cattle (NHTC). GAP involves requirements including animal care and handling standards, the use of growth promotants and antibiotics, and monitoring how the producer manages available forage. NHTC, a standard required by the European Union (EU) for importation of beef products, specifies that cattle not be treated with growth promotants and be traceable to the ranch of origin.



35 Keys to Success Marketing Commercial Cattle

“To qualify for any of these programs, the cattle must be third-party verified from a USDA-approved vendor,” said Gant Mourer, beef value enhancement specialist at Oklahoma State University (OSU). “The auditing process is more about good recordkeeping on the producer’s side. People are concerned that it is an invasive process, but actually they just verify what you are already doing.”

Audits are done face-to-face with producers to help guide them through the certification process and verify their production practices. Gerken explained that

after the producer qualifies for programs with stricter requirements, they can always qualify calves at lower levels. This offers protection against having to treat sick calves or accidents.

“The length of the audit depends on the program and how far we have to travel to see cattle,” Gerken said. “If the ranch has all of their records, it could take as little as a few hours.”

After the cattle are certified for the producer’s program of choice, the next step is finishing the calves at a feedyard.

“If you have verified those animals as natural, they need to be fed at a feedlot that

specifically feeds natural cattle,” Mourer said. “Getting in touch with a feedlot that follows natural guidelines is essential.”

Feedyard focus

Cattleman’s Choice Feedyard in Gage, Okla., is focused on feeding natural and *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) cattle. Producers can feed a pen of as few as 25 program cattle at the yard and retain ownership until the cattle are sold to the packer.

“Retained ownership works very well with program cattle because the producers actually see the full benefit of what they are producing, whether it is natural cattle, NHTC or GAP,” said Dale Moore, owner and general manager of Cattleman’s Choice Feedyard. “They really see the benefit of it by retaining ownership all the way through

and getting the full premium once the cattle are sold.”

An increasing number of consumers are demanding an all-natural product that tastes great, Moore said. Premium prices are steadily increasing in response to demand.

“In December I had a customer net almost \$400 a head with the NHTC and quality-grade premiums combined,” Moore said.

“You will get a higher quality grade by being all natural without the use of steroids.”

Moore emphasized the impact of outstanding genetics on the success of cattle in natural programs. Without the use of technology like implants, quality grades become more dependent on the animal’s genetics.

“Not all cattle that qualify for natural [should] be fed as natural; if the genetics aren’t there, they need the technology,”

Moore said. “That is a big factor that not very many people understand. Just because you raised them naturally does not mean that they are genetically superior enough to fit that program.”

Before the third-party audit, Moore normally visits the ranch himself to see the cattle and talk to the producer about feeding the cattle naturally.

“If they have a good management program or good mineral program, all of that makes a lot of difference,” Moore said. “I put them through an audit prior to a third-party audit to make sure that they will qualify for a program.”

Common feedlot problems like acidosis are virtually nonexistent due to the slower rate of gain and extended feeding of natural cattle, he says. Heifers and steers can be kept

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together without the use of melengestrol acetate (MGA) because cattle from the same ranch are all penned together and kept pleasantly full all day.

“We feed cattle a little longer than normal, and rate of gain is a little lower because we feed a lower-starch, lower-energy diet,” Moore said. “We don’t use Lutalyse® or MGA with our heifers, and we don’t have any issues because we keep them happy.”

Capture your value

After the cattle are finished, Cattleman’s Choice Feedyards markets the natural-program cattle for their owners to the packers.

“I have different cattle that go to different

packers based on breed and based on genetic potential,” Moore said. “Based on breed, weight and time of the year, I market the cattle based on which packer they fit best, and I market to all of the major packers.”

Mourer said Cattleman’s Choice Feedyard helps market natural cattle to packers to ensure the producer receives the value associated with program cattle.

“You can market to larger companies, and that eliminates some of the very hands-on marketing aspects of natural beef,” Mourer said. “After they complete the process once, it becomes much easier to market your beef year after year.”

Gerken said the simplest take-home message for producers is they have been

raising their calves right for years, and natural programs just capture the added value of their work.

“The unknown is the most frightening,” Gerken said. “Once cattlemen realize that they have been doing something valuable all along, it gets a lot easier.”

Raising natural beef includes a connection between producer and consumer that is becoming increasingly more important and more valuable.

“Right now one of the most critical values to capture is to be able to tell your story,” Gerken said. “It is critical to tell our story before someone else does it for us.”

