



Gebhart Ranch Wins Commercial Excellence Award

A western South Dakota family ranch is recognized for cooperation with Certified Angus Beef LLC and the Sire Evaluation Program.



PHOTO BY LARRY CORAH

Mike Gebhart is proudest of his set of first-calf heifers.

BY STEVE SUTHER

A Meadow, S.D., cow-calf rancher won the Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award at the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) “World of Opportunity” annual conference in Whistler, British Columbia, Aug. 26. The Gebhart Ranch represented one of seven producer operations — including five CAB-licensed feedlots — recognized at the conference for their outstanding contributions to the CAB Program, the Angus breed and the beef industry.

The Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award honors a producer who cooperates with CAB in its supply-development programs, uses progressive management and maintains excellent records.

Mike and Jane Gebhart make

the most of their resources in the range country of northwestern South Dakota, and they credit efficient and sustainable range management as a key to ranch success.

Labor also must be efficient. Their sons, Travis and Dalton, attend South Dakota State University and help when they can, while their married daughter, Jerrica, lives several hours away in the Sioux Falls area.

The Gebharts learned the cow that best fits their ranch was to be found within the Angus breed after considering bigger-framed, leaner Continental breeds in the 1980s.

“We found out the hard way — some of those just don’t work out here,” Mike Gebhart says of the exotics. You’ll still see

a little Continental influence in some of the cows, but that’s giving way to Angus-sired replacements.

Most of the older, crossbred cows go into a local “community pasture,” public grassland leased by several ranchers.

“We put our bottom-end cows in there each year, mostly the older ones. It’s a terminal cross where the majority vote chooses a sire, and this year it was Charolais again,” Gebhart says. “In all the other pastures, we use Angus sires that complement our AI (artificial insemination) breeding program.”

Using AI for 25 years is not

common among commercial cow-calf ranchers. Gebhart says, “The quality of genetics is far superior to what we could buy; and through AI, we can also use more balanced genetics that allow us to get replacement heifers out of the matings.

“Working on sire evaluation with Woodhill Farms and Certified Angus Beef, we saw



Meadow, S.D., cow-calf ranchers Mike and Jane Gebhart won the Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award at the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) annual conference Aug. 26. They are shown above with their sons, Travis and Dalton.

PHOTOS BY CARRIE HULM

the potential for continuity in selection, all the way from calving to the rail,” Gebhart says. “I know Brian (McCulloh of Woodhill) doesn’t judge shows anymore and says as long as a heifer has adequate structure, there are a lot of other things more important than the way she looks. But I’m proud of my wet twos (2-year-olds with calves), and it’s sure more fun to look at them than the 10- and 11-year-old cows with their variations.”

A continuous AI program since 1989 has improved the herd of 700 cows and 180 heifers, which is nearly 50% sired by AI bulls. The Gebharts select natural-service sires with similar bloodlines to ensure a uniform calf crop. Heifers start calving in early March, and cows start on March 25.

Gebhart tries to use bulls known for shorter gestation to hurry along the heifers, and pairs move to pasture shortly after they calve. The mature cows calve in a 320-acre pasture, with daily gate-cuts to either of two pastures and a holding pen for the bottom-end cows that will spend their last year in the community pasture.

Besides focusing on the female, the Gebhart Ranch aims to “produce beef that fits the consumer windows of demand.” That means finding out what they produce and how it performs after weaning. And

that means gathering feedlot and carcass data.

With those ideas in mind, it’s no wonder Gebhart decided in spring 1996 to become a cooperating test herd for the Sire Evaluation Program. Over the last three years, that commitment has grown from 42 head to 103 sire-identified steers’ being fed at Kjerestad Livestock Feedlot at Quinn, S.D.

Average daily gains have measured between 3.6 and 3.8 pounds (lb.) — excellent feedlot performance, after gaining a little more than 2.1 lb./day during a 100-day backgrounding period on the ranch.

A unique agreement with Kjerestad has allowed the Gebharts to sell 95% interest in the calves for a negotiated price up front, receiving the other 5%, half of the profits and individual data at harvest.

Marketing plans have shifted through the years and have included IBP, ConAgra and National through U.S. Premium Beef (USPB).

Certified Angus Beef[™] (CAB[®]) acceptance rates had increased from about 25% to near 30% in 1998 and ’99, before slipping below 20% this year. That was due to the addition of some purchased cows and a mild winter that led to higher gains on the ranch and later problems with Yield Grade (YG) 4s. Gebhart plans

“You can talk about the economics of buying replacements all you want, but it’s worth a lot to know what you have.”

— Mike Gebhart



to operate a closed herd in the future, with all replacements generated internally.

Cow-calf producers who don’t feed their cattle don’t realize that the biggest calf on day one can be the least profitable at harvest or that an influx of unknown genetics can affect predictability and end-product performance adversely, but the Gebharts see this firsthand.

“You can talk about the economics of buying replacements all you want, but it’s worth a lot to know what you have,” Gebhart says.

Gebhart selected the sires he evaluated from a list because the pedigrees and expected progeny differences (EPDs) fit what he was trying to accomplish. Some people wonder how Wisconsin cattle

work on the more arid Northern Plains.

“This is great cow country,” Gebhart says, “and our temperatures are about the same as in Wisconsin. I’ve found it’s just a matter of finding the right cattle type, and they quickly adapt.”

McCulloh visited the Gebharts’ ranch in June and complimented them on the excellent cattle he saw.

“They just have a rippin’ set of calves out of their commercial Angus cows,” McCulloh says. Gebhart appreciates the purebred breeder’s advice in charting a course for greater uniformity and progress toward achieving higher CAB acceptance rates down the road.

