

# Beyond A Buzzword

*Wilson Cattle Co. & Beef Northwest earn first CAB Sustainability Award.*

*by Nicole Lane Erceg, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

The water flows with strategic design through pastures enclosed by precisely kept barbed-wire fences. Bee boxes seem as ordinary here as the pine trees, homes for ranch pollinators. A hawk leaves the sky to land gently on its perch, placed there decisively, long before he thought to rest his wings.

Little goes on without specific purpose at Wilson Cattle Co.

It's not the work of fancy technology, though spreadsheets of data and consultants lend their hand. It's six generations of meticulous puzzle masters who focused on making better each piece of the bigger picture.

It's a philosophy: One plus one should always equal more than two.

Cattle, of course, are a critical part of the equation. It's their measurement of performance that determines success.

But the people, they are the multipliers.

## The ranch

He looks a little more East Coast than his western cowboy genes. The sixth generation to manage the land, Zach Wilson is a modern cattleman. The hybrid thinker multitasks on a drive through the ranch, maneuvering his pickup to check grass, chat with cowboys, cuss the things that could get better, all while his to-do list at the office tugs at him to get back to work.

Like his visionary ancestors who followed the Oregon Trail, raised



horses for the Cavalry during World War I and started a feeding enterprise in the Pacific Northwest, Wilson pushes boundaries. He's on a mission to amplify his resources to make things better.

"What I hope to leave on this ranch when they put 6 feet of dirt on me is an improved water system," Wilson says. "The flood irrigation is a good way to do things, but I think there are great ways to do things."

It might sound like a minor detail, but the 6,000-acre ranch near North Powder, Ore., gets an average rainfall of just 12 inches. Most soil moisture comes from snow, and it's irrigated pasture that makes their land stand out in sagebrush country.

Their system is based on intensive rotational grazing combined with making the land the best habitat possible for the more than 2,000 Angus-based commercial cows and

12,000 stocker cattle that call it home.

"If it's good for the little bugs in the soil, or the migratory birds or larger mammals like elk or deer, even rodents, it's going to be good for the cattle," Wilson says. "If you treat it more as a holistic system, rather than simply inputs for the cattle, then you're going to get better performance out of your cattle."

It's not, as Wilson would put it, "hippy woo-woo." He has the data to prove it works, boiling down the economic input into gains and head-days in pasture. Limited input, maximum production output tracked on a per-head basis gets the most for his resource dollar.

"Our job is to work with Mother Nature," he says. "She knows best. We try to figure out the best incentives for what is going to help her be her most productive self."

It's a high road that takes discipline.



"It's such a hands-on experience that you can't get in a classroom. To be able to be here and ride horses, walk pens, doctor cattle and go feed, you can't beat that." — Caitlin Culvert

"The ranch is like a muscle," Wilson explains. "We're working it out to make it stronger, just like we'd go to the gym and do push-ups. It's a living organism, and it should be treated as such."

The riparian barriers, waterfowl habitat and soil microbiology aren't just feel-good projects. They are strategic investments to raise better beef, more efficiently.

He points to an elevated bird box: "Some goose pair has probably been coming here for 15 years, raising their goslings and then moving on."

Their droppings fertilize the soil. With them comes a diversity of bird populations that help manage flies, in turn helping the cattle. He sees each detail as a piece of a bigger cycle. His job is to steward it all.

"It means a lot to me to take care of the land. Six generations on this land means a lot of people have put a lot of sweat equity into it, and I want to make sure that I'm treating it the way it should be treated," Wilson says. "Feeding the world with what we do, I take that to heart."

The systems thinking extends beyond the ranch to Beef Northwest, which feeds the ranch's cattle.

The two entities are halves of the same whole. One feeds, the other breeds and stocks a steady supply ready to fill the pens as they empty. Wilson's cattle harvest the grass in Baker Valley, while Beef Northwest, started by the fifth generation of Wilsons, expands the

enterprise with yards throughout the Pacific Northwest. It's a symbiotic relationship, both dependent on each other — challenging even for those who serve inside to determine where one ends and the other begins.

The feedyard partnership gives Wilson a long-term view of the product and access to carcass data that indicate wins and losses.

It's a system built on synergies.

## The feedyard

*I don't have a background in agriculture. I started here as an intern.*

It's a story told by many employed at the yard. From the voice answering the phones to the manager at the yard in Quincy, Wash., to the pen rider monitoring cattle in the Nyssa feedyard near the Idaho border, people are the hub of this wheel.

Together they care for more than 100,000 head in four locations, the other two at Hermiston and Boardman, Ore.

"I believe the quality of the beef that comes out of Beef Northwest is directly related to the quality of the people," says Wes Killion, COO. "It's a window into the company that goes with every aspect, be it environmental stewardship, animal health, animal performance or consumer eating experience."

The cowboy at the top takes the commitment to consistently producing quality beef as seriously as the fresh new graduate a few weeks into her career.

Growing and equipping leaders is key to the strategy.

Giving people what they need to do a good job, that's what Liz Nielson does. Last summer her title was intern; today it's training coordinator.

"We try to give people the tools, experience and attention they need and make them feel like this is their home," she says. "By boosting their confidence, work ability and skills — that directly relates to cattle performance."

The energetic young cattlegirl came to the feeding business with no experience, but acts as a sponge of knowledge, quickly grasping new techniques and teaching others.

"When someone truly understands why scraping a pen translates to cattle feed conversion, then they understand that every day when they go out they are making a difference," Nielson says. "When cattle go to harvest and consumers get their product, they've directly had a hand in making that experience a good one."

It's a business that's less transactional, more relational. A system built on motivating people to do the right thing.

"I was the first intern," says Pete Szasz. Today, with 15 years of experience under his straw hat, he's the manager at the Boardman yard. Szasz and his team have 40,000 heartbeats relying on them for a meal three times a day.

"We're trying to make high-quality beef that's wholesome," Szasz says.

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“You don’t do that without quality ingredients, no matter how hard you try.”

Eastern Oregon isn’t known for cattle feeding. Far from the Corn Belt and High Plains, the model requires progressive thinkers who harness a resource the landscape does offer: potatoes.

The feeding facility sits just down the freeway from french-fry factories. The highly nutritious and palatable carbohydrate provides energy. Tater tots, fries and jojos that don’t make spec become the basis for a high-quality mixed ration.

“If we weren’t here to utilize the potatoes, they would end up in a landfill,” Szasz explains. “That’s where they were going, prior to us being in the area.”

It’s in their DNA to look for opportunities to innovate around every corner. At the same time, the Beef Northwest team fiercely protects the best traditions of the past.

Pen riders trot with purpose, communicating via mailboxes at the end of the pen rows. Their path is mapped using GPS, and drones assist precise nutrient management and a responsible water run-off strategy. Each animal they check has electronic identification in its ear, and the feed in the bunks is quality-control tested.

It’s cowboys and cutting-edge technology, a commitment to excellence in every chore. Quality cattle feeding requires focus beyond the feedbunk, and they hold themselves accountable through Progressive Beef.

## The buzzword

Sustainability was a mindset at Beef Northwest and Wilson Cattle Co. long before the term became a buzzword, earning the sister organizations the first-ever *Certified*



*Angus Beef*® (CAB®) Sustainability Commitment to Excellence Award.

“The more we can take care of the environment, the better opportunity there is for a better outcome for the cattle, be it health or performance, as well as quality,” Killion says. “All of those play a vital role. If we don’t do that, then we’re probably putting employees at risk, as well. We want to be leaders and not followers on the environmental aspect of feeding.”

It’s not just asking how to make better cattle, but how to create a better system.

“It’s a big web, and at first glance we might not see why we do it, but it all comes down to the product we give to the consumer,” Nielson says. “That’s the most important thing — raising beef that not only tastes good, but that we’ve done everything we can to make sure it’s the best quality they could get.”

Szasz agrees. The ideal animal coming into his yard begins with quality genetics. He’s looking for an Angus-type, 750-pound steer that won’t have any health challenges.

“It is something we truly value,” Killion says, “and when we go out and procure cattle, we’re always looking at cattle that would qualify for *Certified Angus Beef* premiums.” Because sustainability includes a black bottom line.

“I think there’s a disconnect when

people talk about sustainability, that it’s either profit or environmental improvement,” Wilson says. “It’s the exact opposite. To me it means working with the weather, the land, the people and the cattle — letting nature and the environment tell us what to do, because if you do that, then the bottom line will show you’re doing the right thing.”

The idea is the great cattle make the land better, and the people make better cattle.

“When I think about sustainability, it’s creating relationships with ranchers and people we do business with year in and year out,” Szasz says.

It shows. Many of their feeding partnerships measure in decades and second-generation employees ride to work with the first.

Sustainability is a nebulous term, one so all-encompassing as to challenge grasp. In this corner of the world, though, it’s a clear, shared vision that the business is much bigger than any one individual. Each person’s commitment to consistent betterment in their area of ecology, cattle health, genetics, technology or people creates collective value.

Sustainability isn’t just about the end product, the ranch or the feedyard. It’s everyone in between. **AJ**

*Editor’s note: Nicole Lane Erceg is director of communications for CAB.*