



ANNUAL CONFERENCE  
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Progressive Partner Award

# Stepping Up to Quality

by *Lance Zimmerman*



PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

► Named the 2004 CAB Progressive Partner of the Year, Wheeler Feed Yard Inc. of Wheeler, Texas, won recognition among more than 80 CAB partner feedlots in 16 states for finding innovative ways to incorporate a quality beef production and management focus into its daily operations.

**B**y all accounts, Stacy McCasland and his father, Don, are nice folks. But they knew it would take more than Southern hospitality and a commodity-based feeding approach to keep their feedlot competitive among the large feedlots of Texas.

Wheeler Feed Yard Inc., west of Wheeler, Texas, needed to separate itself from the pack. Becoming a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot in 2002 gave it the needed boost — even if it wasn't for the reasons the McCaslands had expected.

"We got started with CAB as a way to get an extra \$3 per head for grid cattle," Stacy McCasland says. "But now it has definitely grown to more than that. It helped change the way we think."

Now the yard's dedication to quality in an otherwise commodity cattle environment

has done more than separate it from most Texas yards. It has won recognition among more than 80 CAB partner feedlots in 16 states.

Wheeler Feed Yard is the 2004 CAB Progressive Partner of the Year for finding innovative ways to incorporate a quality beef production and management focus into its daily operations.

## **CAB credibility**

"Enrolling close to 75% of cattle in the pens is a huge sign of dedication for any CAB partner," says Gary Fike, CAB feedlot specialist. "With its capacity of 32,000 head, Wheeler Feed Yard is making a statement — it is deeply committed to the discovery phase."

"A feedyard sells feed, but most people do

not come to us just because we have better or cheaper feed," McCasland says.

"Producers like to work with us because we have credibility and offer them services as CAB partners."

As one of only a few CAB-licensed feedlots in Texas, Wheeler Feed Yard can offer opportunities producers might not find in other yards. The feedlot's well-kept facilities, risk management experience and sorting abilities also attract customers.

"We have worked really hard to get different people involved," feedlot manager Jon Vanwey says. "CAB is helping us do things a little bit different to make that possible."

Like any yard, the goal is to stay full, he says. However, being CAB-licensed means there is an additional incentive to "work

hard at earning customers a premium,” Vanwey says. That job gets easier when it comes to marketing Angus cattle.

“The time people invest in raising cattle for a CAB target helps a lot,” Vanwey says. “Cattle buyers like a quality product, especially Angus cattle, and that is easier on us in comparison to the other cattle we have on hand.”

One of the trademarks of Wheeler Feed Yard is how it satisfies its diverse customer base. Most of its customers buy cattle a few at a time and feed the unknown mixed pens to an average finish, but the McCaslands are beginning to forge links with producers of known, higher-quality Angus cattle.

Vanwey says it is just a matter of “giving producers whatever they want.” He says some want the top price regardless of data, while others focus on the data as much as price.

“Producers ask for our advice, and we tell them what we see in the cattle,” Vanwey says. “If we think the cattle should be marketed on the grid, we give them advice on how to earn that extra premium.”

The information that comes with it will help, too. Customers cannot expect to make progress without getting carcass data, McCasland points out.

“The more producers want to improve their herds, the more they need to know where they are at currently,” he says. “The only way to really understand that is through the data you get by feeding the cattle yourself.”

Wheeler Feed Yard is working with cow-calf and seedstock producers to offer more retained ownership options if feeding cattle to finish is a financial strain.

One example is its three-way partnership open to customers of Hutson Farms, Elk City, Okla., allied with Profit Maker Bulls (PMB), Ogallala, Neb. Producers who use PMB bulls may feed progeny at Wheeler Feed Yard while retaining one-third interest.

Hutson Farms and the feedlot assume the other two-thirds ownership.

“It becomes a sharing process in the knowledge of how those cattle perform on the grid and lets all of us see the value in the cattle,” McCasland says. “It gives the retained owner an easy way to feed cattle and receive carcass data without investing in the entire calf crop.

“Growing Angus seedstock is getting more competitive, and this is one way Hutson can secure more bull clients,”

McCasland adds. “I think producers — both seedstock and commercial — will be more aggressive in herd improvement through efforts like this. That’s why we want to facilitate these type of programs.”

### Realizing the benefits

McCasland has worked hard to bring in more customers who want to improve the quality of their calves. Through letters and customer-appreciation events, he has even been able to help cattle buyers understand the value in paying for Angus genetics.

“Many of our customers are just after putting feedlot cattle together by purchasing them,” he says. “Now they are seeing that even if they focus just a little more on quality at the sale barn, they realize the benefits in carcass premiums.”

Bob and Mike Roberts, owners of Roberts Cattle Co., Mount Olive, Miss., followed McCasland’s advice and fed 200 head with Wheeler Feed Yard for the first time this year.

“We are seeing it on the performance side of things, starting to market those cattle sooner,” Mike says. “In the past, we would get stuck with feeding some of the other

cattle a little longer, and with a down market we were just chipping away at every dollar we could make.”

Now they can market Angus-influence cattle on value-based grids when they want to, losing nothing by overfeeding, because packers want their cattle.

The Roberts family has cattle at other feedlots, but Mike says the experience Wheeler Feed Yard has in marketing and technical analysis has opened up the possibility of feeding more cattle there in the future.

Sorting expertise is another big draw, Vanwey says.

“In the end, we try to make the most out of the grid by sorting, as most of our pens are put-together cattle,” he says. “You can get a lot of fat-cattle buyers interested because you have black-hided cattle, but to get the premiums, you have to sort quite a bit on the terminal end.”

Vanwey admits that can be a hassle, but sorting helps him maximize customer returns

from the packer. That’s a major focus for the feedlot, but McCasland says being CAB-licensed is more than just the ability to get a premium.

“It is a new concept for people down here, where many do not really understand the full value of quality cattle,” McCasland says. “But it is starting to grow. The relationships have been good, and people recognize CAB all over the place. We say we are CAB-licensed and people listen.”

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