



Darnall Feedlot

At Your Service

Darnall Feedlot gives customers what they want, wins 2006 CAB feedlot award.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

Surrounded by the Wildcat Bluffs and miles of grassland, Gary Darnall's grandfather "proved up" in western Nebraska. That was 1892, and the cattle family has been there ever since. Roots in the cow-calf industry spurred their interest in feeding cattle.

"We're a family operation," says Gary, who manages the 20,000-head Darnall Feedlot with his son, Lane. "We've been here through the years and we enjoy what we're doing."

The cow herd was the sole focus of the Harrisburg, Neb., operation for more than 75 years, but when Gary came back to the

ranch, he started the feedlot. The bluffs provide a scenic backdrop for the winding dirt road that introduces visitors to the ranch and leads them to the feedlot.

First feeding the ranch's calves in the late 1970s, the feedlot gradually grew with demand for its services. The Darnalls have saved room to expand again if necessary.

"It was a way for the ranch to expand to the size that we could support more families," Gary says. Lane joined the operation upon his graduation from the University of Wyoming in 1986.

Though the yard has grown and became a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed

**Darnall Feedlot
Feedlot Partner of the Year
≥15,000 head**



feedlot in 1999, the Darnalls still maintain the same principles it was founded on.

"Our objective here is to provide a service to our customer," Gary says. "Whatever that is or can be is what we want to do. Each customer is an individual and each customer has different wishes. They want different things. If we can provide that, it's good."

For that approach, CAB named Darnall the Feedlot Partner of the Year for yards greater than 15,000 head capacity. Chosen from a nationwide network of licensed partners, Gary Darnall accepted the award at the CAB annual conference, Aug. 19, in Seattle, Wash.

Tracking trends

Through the years, the father-son duo has picked up on trends that helped grow the feedlot.

One recognized trend came when CAB approached them about becoming a licensed feedlot. The Darnalls had already been providing performance data back to their customers, but they noticed a need to convey carcass data as well.



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"I saw it was a tool we could utilize to provide more information back to the customer who wanted that information," Lane says. "CAB has been here to help us return the cattle information in a neat and concise report."

The feedlot was one of the first to partner with CAB.

"It's been one of the greatest things to happen to us," Gary says.

Paul Dykstra, CAB feedlot specialist, says the Darnalls make the relationship work.

"They are dedicated to getting information back to their customers, and it shows," he says. "They attract producers who want to improve their herds and carcass quality."

Working through CAB, Darnall can provide customers with annual reports that track their history at the feedlot.

"One of the real assets that CAB has here is showing that progression. We've got customers who have gotten an annual report maybe three, four and five times, and they see that progression," Gary says. "In some areas it isn't progression, and they say, 'We better do something about this.'"

The Darnalls also track progress within their own cattle herd.

"We look forward to that information every year," says Gary, who uses the carcass data to make culling decisions. "We're always asking ourselves what we can do in our genetics to improve."

In 2004, cattle from their commercial herd won the National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC) heifer division. The pen of 40 head graded 65% Prime and *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) while a second pen earned third place in the steer division.

Targeting the brand

As both feedlot owners and cow-calf managers, the Darnalls know what kind of cattle to target.

"All of us are in the business of trying to produce protein for the consumer," Gary says. "In a feedlot, performance is so important. In addition to having the carcass traits, we've got to have performance. We've got to have both."

Their herd helps them relate to customers.

"When we sit down and talk to the ranchers, we compare notes," Gary says. "We compare what happened in our cow herd to theirs."

The two-way conversations, however, start long before the cattle enter the yard.

"Management actually starts before the calves ever come in — helping the owner make the decision whether it's profitable for them to feed their cattle," Lane says.

Gary adds, "We want to visit with the owner. We want to know the health program on those cattle. We want to know the age of those calves. We want to know some of the history of the herd."



► Named CAB Feedlot Partner of the Year for feedlots with a capacity greater than 15,000 head, Darnall Feedlot recruits the majority of its cattle from areas north and west of the feedlot, primarily Montana, Wyoming and the Dakotas.

Most of the cattle are retained ownership, so Gary and Lane talk with producers about options like implanting and ultrasound scanning.

"Once we get them here, then it's hands-on management," Lane says.

Darnall recruits the majority of its cattle from areas north and west of the feedlot, primarily Montana, Wyoming and the Dakotas.

"We are fortunate to be in this part of the world where we have quality cattle that we get to feed," Gary says. "Not only carcass quality, but performance quality."

They take those cattle into the feedlot and treat them right.

"Darnall is a dynamite combination of a large feedlot and ranch, feeding good cattle the right way," Dykstra says. "In 2005, they were in the top 10% of all licensed feedlots for acceptance into the *Certified Angus Beef* brand."

In addition to the feedlot and commercial herd, the family has a number of acres of irrigated and dryland crops.

"We have very, very good personnel," Lane says. "We surround ourselves with some of the best people in the industry that help us daily, and that's how we manage everything."

Lane supervises the personnel and internal issues, while Gary handles the majority of the marketing and customer service.

Together they're committed to the same philosophy.

"We're interested in working with the rancher to maximize his net profit when we market these animals," Gary says.

Lane adds, "It's our goal to provide whatever service our customers desire."



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