

Betting on Natural



Kansas feedlot goes 100% natural and aims for the CAB® brand target.

Story & photos by **Tricia Dicke**

Betting on the future is a tough game to play, but it's a way to get ahead. Thomas County Feeders, Colby, Kan., has gone "all in" on the all-natural beef niche.

Management of the 18,000-head feedlot decided to play that hand in November 2005. With a goal of becoming 100% natural Angus in one year, it's been more of a sprint than a jog, and the whole crew has come to share in the vision. Manager Mike Hunter has led the charge.

With his cowboy hat on and two-way radio in hand, Hunter travels around the feedyard, managing the daily routines. Working with cattle and feeding is old hat for him, having started his career at the age of 15.

"Back in my younger days, I had the mind-set of a cowboy," he says. "I gained a lot of experience

working at the feedlot; sometimes that's the best education anyone can get." Years of experience later, Hunter also attributes success and satisfaction to dealing with Angus.

"Driving down the highway, you look across your feedyard and see nothing but a sea of black Angus — it's amazing," he says. "And at the same time, exciting to be part of a branded program with a specific product for a specific consumer."

Changes

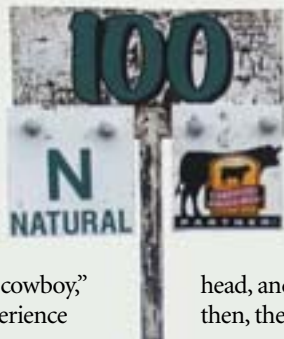
The cattle haven't always been black. Hunter and his staff have transformed the once multicolored cattle yard into a monolithic Angus business.

"When I got here in 2000, we only had around 5,000 head, and very few black," Hunter says. Since then, the yard has specialized in a greater

share of Angus cattle as a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) partner, and more than 28% of those enrolled have been accepted for the brand. "With CAB's expertise in marketing, we developed an ad for magazines," he explains. "We put logos on business cards, calendars and letterhead, just to get the word out that we were looking for Angus cattle."

Since the commitment to natural production last fall, Thomas County's longtime affiliation with the Beef Marketing Group (BMG) has stepped up to fill that need.

BMG is a consortium of 13 feedlots in Kansas and Nebraska (five of them in natural Angus) with the goal of producing beef that meets the exact specifications for value-added, branded programs. It procures cattle for those who are looking for assured quality, and serves as the production link between *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) Natural and Tyson Foods.



The natural Angus commitment has brought new chores to Thomas County. "There's a tremendous amount of sorting with these cattle — inbound and outbound," Hunter says. "That's because we are trying to group similar condition and age cattle to reduce sorting at harvest. But we still have to do some sorting at the end to maximize quality grade.

"We did some sorting before, but when everything you do is designed to hit a specific grid target, you have to get a lot more precise," he says. "I probably sort cattle at least three days a week, if not four."

Health protocol

It starts when the calves arrive, mostly from the North and West, all under BMG ownership. "We require everything to have two rounds of vaccine and [to be] weaned at least 45 days before we'll purchase them," Hunter explains. "Commingle cattle from various producers can, and has, created health issues."

A feedlot committed to natural cattle can ill afford such problems, he notes. "When an animal is treated with antibiotics, they are out of the natural program, so if we have very many, it can be costly. And our employees look at it as reducing the supply of natural Angus product to the consumer," he adds.

So far, there have been few problems. After putting more than 15,000 head through the program, Hunter says, "We're running 3.06% treated where everybody tells me it should be closer to 15% or 20%. The programs and procedures in place are working." Additionally, death loss has been less than 0.5%.

New arrivals not already wearing one get a radio frequency identification (RFID) tag, an individual lot tag and a BMG Natural tag. If a calf must be treated, that tag is cut out and replaced with an orange "SV" tag to designate source-verified.

"Then he is out of our system, transferred to a fallout pen," Hunter says. "At arrival, any non-blacks also fall out and will be finished at one of the other BMG yards. That lets us focus on the all-natural cattle, removing all feed ingredients not qualified."



► "We must maintain the integrity of the program. We do it with a zero-tolerance attitude," manager Mike Hunter says.

Thomas County and BMG provide carcass data back to cooperating producers, "to aid them in culling decisions," Hunter says. "Giving the customer feedback is essential to the success of their program and ours."

While ranchers sort out genetics, the feedlot concerns itself with managing feed intake of the natural calves.

Without ionophores or antibiotics, the crew must pay special attention to detail in bunk management to avoid bloat and liver abscesses. Steam-flaking the corn, feed

batching and delivery are unchanged, but the yard uses more bunk hay now, especially with the calves that make up most of the placements.

Hunter says a bunk full of Bermuda grass hay and clean water is essential to the goal of perfect health.

► BMG and Thomas County provide carcass data to assist producers with culling decisions in their herds.

"We want to provide the highest available nutrition to those calves upon arrival. Hay quality is most important for us, and price is secondary," he says. "The hay in the bunk must be appealing and palatable, and high-quality Bermuda grass is both."

Policing the feeding procedures and bunk hay management were keys to success in the sprint toward all-natural, healthy cattle. "We had numerous meetings about the dos and don'ts," Hunter says. Employee training on handling the paperwork that comes along with natural cattle was a must.

"Producer affidavits and all the information entered into the database take some time. Editing or changing those documents, because of cattle falling out, can also take a lot of time, so you want to get it right up front," he says.

Before going all-natural, the feedlot managed a transitional phase. "We made sure we kept the naturals away from the commodity cattle," Hunter says. "We built a bunk separator, a metal apparatus, to put between the pens to keep them from reaching around."

In going 100% natural, the feedlot cannot afford to allow any exceptions. And don't worry, they're checking.

"Every ear that goes through the chute is palpated for implants and antibiotics," Hunter says. "We have had some instances where producers used implants, and their cattle were rejected from the program."

He admits there has been a loss of at least 80 pounds in total gain by going the natural route. "But the cattle are grading far better than commodity cattle, because of their genetics and being natural. Our system tracks the cost and benefit very closely."

Betting on the natural niche is a risk worth taking, if you have the commitment to back it up, Hunter says. "We must maintain the integrity of the program. We do it with a zero-tolerance attitude."

Thomas County Feeders makes it look like not such a gamble after all.

