

# Where Realistic Meets High



## Kansas family roots feed big CAB Feedlot Partner of the Year.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**F**ord County Feed Yard is a big one. In fact, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) has never licensed a larger feedyard, but the 50,000-head-capacity business runs like a collection of smaller yards.

Maybe that's because it is family-owned and -operated, and 22-year manager Danny Herrmann is the youngest son of a founding partner. Wheat-stocker and feeder George Herrmann went in with four others, including three from what later became National Beef in Dodge City, to build the feedyard 15 miles to the southeast, near Ford, Kan., starting in 1972.

Big from the start at 15,000 head, it

doubled a couple of years later and was added to in sections to reach current capacity by the time its current manager took the reins in 1990.

Maybe that made the alleyways seem like neighborhoods for different types of cattle that came in off the wheat or up from Mexico or in from auctions and farms in the fall — and

there were more Herefords than Angus for many years.

Or maybe, Herrmann suggests today, “When you have to get in 100,000 head a year, you’ve got to dance with everybody.”

**Feedlot Partner of the Year for yards with more than 15,000-head capacity.**

### Emphasizing Angus

Seeing more and better Angus cattle coming in, Herrmann decided in 2010 to do more than dance and became a CAB partner yard. He gradually built up to enrolling 5,000 head by last spring, and 15,407 head in the 12 months ending in May this year.

Herrmann still feeds a huge number of cattle that are not eligible for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, but he and the staff of 45 at the feedlot committed to the program and showed the greatest increase in single-year enrollments, with a respectable 21.4% CAB and Prime.

Ford County Feed Yard channeled several thousand cattle into the CAB supply chain in the last year, while expanding data feedback and sharing with customers for

► **Above:** Ford County Feed Yard manager Danny Herrmann says sharing information is good for customers and good for the beef industry.

# Quality

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**— Danny Herrmann**

herd improvement. That's part of the reason the company was chosen to be honored at the CAB annual conference in Desert Palms, Calif., Sept. 20-22. Herrmann and his wife, Colleen, made plans to fly out and accept the CAB Feedlot Partner of the Year Award for yards with more than 15,000-head capacity.

To keep it close to full, big sections of the big yard are filled with average, commodity cattle on which family or other investors hope to make money by upgrading. The motley pens of former rodeo stock may look foreign, but the ones that actually came from south of the border look better.

"We've always been in the Mexican trade," Herrmann says, looking over the lean, light-colored cattle. In the 1980s, his father spent a lot of time working with government officials to get up to 25,000 cattle per year into holding pens and then trucking them north.



► When it comes to "program" cattle, Angus have led the way to more grid marketing in recent years.

Relationships were so close that Herrmann and brother David spent time on a Mexican ranch and attended high school for a year deep in the heart of that country. Meanwhile Javier Webb, a son from that ranch, stayed with the Herrmanns in Kansas.

That was long before the days of drug cartels and gangs around Torreon, but it opened Herrmann's eyes to a different culture and helped him appreciate home. The families are still close and still doing business.

The "program" alleys at Ford County include dairy steers that he calls, "the other red meat," steers that stay most of the year so there's less worry about refilling those pens. Herefords often perform better than they grade, but fit in with the balance. Angus have led the way to more grid marketing in recent years.

If there's one breed that is most likely to do it all, in terms of feedlot performance and

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grade, “that would be Angus,” Herrmann says. “They’ve gotten the genetics that can get them big. There are herds that will gain, convert well and also do well in the packinghouse.”

### Sold on the eating experience

He wasn’t feeding many of those in the early 1990s when he and Colleen were on vacation in The Cayman Islands and gained a favorable impression of CAB.

“I remember seeing the brand and being surprised first, and then I remember what a good eating experience it was,” Herrmann says.

He saw more Angus cattle doing it all in the feedlot, and other leading feedlots building on that fact in their yards.

“So I thought, why can’t we participate in this? And it’s neat, taking a closer look at what groups of these calves are doing, where half of a load can make CAB,” Herrmann says. “We need more like that.”

### Working with customers

Data feedback to the farm or ranch has been a feature for years, but detailed breakdown and analyses from CAB have allowed a new level for customers who plan to use the information to improve.

Bryan Adams, Welda, Kan., was a college roommate back in the 1980s and has fed with Herrmann for 28 years. His AAA Farms



► This billboard at the driveway to the yard invites Angus producers to join in the program by feeding at this CAB feedlot partner.

backgrounding yard has room for calves from his own 400 commercial Angus cows, plus those from several neighbors using Angus genetics, bought to fill trucks for load lots.

“My dad started with nothing and traded his way up, but calves were usually one-third good, a third medium and a third

runts,” Adams says. “Twenty years ago I got more involved, and we built on a set of 30 Montana-origin Angus heifers.”

Making use of feedback from Ford County and registered-Angus bulls, mainly from the Gardiner, Hinkle and Ratcliff Ranch programs, Adams developed half spring- and half fall-calving Angus herds that do not produce runts. Closeouts on two loads of heifers this year show average daily gains of 3.82 pounds (lb.) in February and 3.58 lb. in July, both converting dry matter at better than 6-to-1. CAB acceptance was 40.3% and 34%, respectively.

“We’re getting \$15 to \$20 in premiums now, but we’re really just starting to work on the carcass side,” Adams says.

All cows are freeze-branded and individual records made source- and age-verified programs a snap in the past. Disheartened by their discontinuation this year, he paid less attention to records this spring but plans to redouble that effort for new reasons.

“It’s not going to be an automatic per-head premium now, but we can use information to get to higher average premiums,” Adams says, noting the individual reports show the lowest-value cattle are generally Select grade, while the first page starts with the Prime and CAB carcasses.

### Going after the data

Closer to the feedyard, brothers Steve and Leroy Wetzel, near Offerle, Kan., started



► Many of the cattle at Ford County Feed Yard come in from video sales, sometimes bought by brothers Ronnie or John Herrmann, who own more than a quarter of them.



finishing their Angus calves at home in 1986 after the USDA Dairy Buyout collapsed the market for their calves. A couple of years later they were making \$200 per head profit in the cash live market, but since then it's been up and down, says Steve.

While he's seen closeouts from Herrmann, the Wetzels rely on advice from seedstock suppliers Mundhenke Angus at Lewis, Kan., or McCurry Bros., Mount Hope, Kan., when buying bulls for their 250 cows.

To get back to \$200 profits again, they'll start grid marketing next year through Ford County, where the 2011 calves made 90% Choice. That plan derives from the fact that two of his sons and a nephew are getting more involved in the business, and Wetzels says they'll need more data to ensure profitability.

Many of the cattle at Ford County Feed Yard come in from video sales, sometimes bought by brothers Ronnie or John Herrmann. The latter operates Ford Cattle Co., which owns more than a quarter of the cattle in the yard.

As an example of the Angus influence there, a couple of pens in 2011 came from Sandhills rancher Donald Cox, Mullen, Neb., through Northern Video Auction.

"My dad runs yearlings, and I sell calves. Ford County bought both sets that year, as they have other times," Cox says. "We like to know how they did."

Those made 38% CAB and Prime, product of a herd that has used only registered-Angus bulls for 25 years after departing from its Hereford roots. Most of the bulls come from the neighbors, Kraye Angus Ranch, and some from Christensen Cattle Co. at Central City, Neb.

"After last year, we are quite a lot fewer here," Cox says. "We were a 650-cow-calf and yearling operation, and now we are down to 500 cows and no yearlings."

But July rains restored

optimism, and a keen interest in rebuilding to improve carcass results.

Getting data back has been difficult for Cox, who has not retained ownership. But he looks forward to future data when Ford County buys his calves, and may consider partnering.

"My goal is to work the data down to the cow," he says. "With the information out there now, you can sure tell what cows are doing what, and what bulls are doing what—and that's important from my end of it. I'm always striving to produce a better T-bone steak for the table."

Herrmann will talk partnering with anybody on ranch-direct calves if health and genetic background are known, and he welcomes contacts from those who sold all interest but still want individual data back.

"If people just let me know up front, before the cattle arrive at the yard, we can usually get the data," he says. "It really helps if they can use electronic ID tags because that's getting into the automatic reads at the packing plants. Without that, there's a per-head cost and less chance of getting it right."

Sharing information is good for customers, and good for the beef industry, Herrmann says.

"I say give them everything we know about what stuff does here, so they know. That's the best thing for a producer," he says. "Otherwise, they're always assuming, and usually assuming calves are better than they are."

By working together, optimistic assumptions can become reality, Herrmann adds.



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**Editor's Note:** Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.