



Illinois grower produces cattle for the top tier of the market.

Story & photos by *Dorothy Spencer*

Bill Boston believes eating beef should be memorable for all the right reasons. That's why the Athensville, Ill., cattleman aims to produce *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand Natural and Prime.

"When a consumer goes to the grocery store and buys a steak, they should really look forward to eating it," Boston says.

He's put numerous strategies in place to ensure he hits the mark and gives everyone eating his end products a good experience. In 2007, Boston achieved 85% CAB Natural, including 35% Prime, but he wants to improve that to 100% Prime while continuing to sell in the natural market.

Boston admits it's a lofty goal, considering the average herd produces few Prime calves, but Boston says, "If I can get one or two, there is no reason I can't have them all go Prime."

► **Above:** "I like producing high-quality cattle," says Athensville, Ill., cattleman Bill Boston.

► **Left:** The mother of his No. 146 calf represents the ideals — soundness, calving ease, disposition and the ability to produce big, fast-growing, high-quality calves.

He knows quality is a deliberate journey, just like his beginnings in the cow-calf industry. After earning a degree from the University of Illinois, he had a good idea of what it took to raise beef. But, wanting to diversify his knowledge base, Boston spent

five years working as an animal science instructor at a university in Sierra Leone, West Africa.

Returning stateside to start his own herd in 1974, Boston and his young wife, Sue,

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Primed for CAB Natural CONTINUED FROM PAGE 123

staked a claim just south of where they both grew up in Sangamon County, Illinois.

In the beginning, Boston rented cows from his father, a Polled Hereford breeder. After “jumping on the crossbreeding bandwagon,” Boston realized that he needed superior genetics to make the grade.

“We were eating steak one day and my wife said, ‘If you can’t grow meat better than this, I don’t want to eat it,’” Boston recalls. The next week he sold all of his red bulls

and bought Angus ones. Since then, Boston has gradually increased Angus usage to nearly 100%.

Production improvements

Beyond breed, Boston and his daughter-in-law, Kim, keep narrowing their selection criteria. This year they culled about 25 cows.

“If we don’t start more aggressive culling, it’s going to take my entire lifetime to clean up this herd,” Boston says. The mother of

his No. 146 calf represents the ideals — soundness, calving ease, disposition and the ability to produce big, fast-growing, high-quality calves.

The 200 cows graze in a three-pasture, subdivided paddock system. He says the intensive grazing system is the No. 1 improvement to the operation throughout the years. Cows rotate through five to seven paddocks in each pasture. In addition to readily available water, pastures offer fescue and are top-dressed with high-quality red clover every two or three years. In the fall, the cows also graze on oats and turnips.

Boston reduces pressure on forage through early weaning, which he ranks as his second-biggest production improvement. Weaning moved from the traditional seven months to five months a few years ago, with plans to try the University of Illinois plan for 90-day weaning.

Whenever it occurs, the calves' next stop is the family's feedlot. There, Boston immediately puts them on a high-energy diet of corn, corn silage and a soybean-meal-based supplement. He ranks that as No. 3 on the improvements list, because he used to take a grow-slower approach.

"We really push the calves as hard as we

can when it comes to feedlot growth," he says.

Boston swears by his "secret ingredient," BoCo™, a bypass choline product that keeps abscesses off calf livers. Three years ago, the manufacturers asked Boston to try the product, which was already popular in the dairy industry. He took the chance to try it at no cost.

"I wouldn't feed without it now," Boston says, noting improvements in other health areas, such as bloat.

Continuing to seek out all technologies to improve production, Boston uses a CIDR® and prostaglandin protocol to synchronize

and artificially inseminate (AI) heifers. Kim and her husband, Boston's son, Mark, were educated in the process at the Graham Cattle School, in Garnett, Kan.

"We learned a lot of new techniques and information that we can put to use here," she says.

New improvements keep the herd moving forward, but it's important to keep the solid base it was founded on, too.

"I never had disposition problems or owned a puller until I started crossbreeding," Boston says, "but when I started, I sure bought one quick!"

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Search for superior genetics

He firmly believes calving ease, structural soundness and disposition have to be automatic when considering a sire. To round out his top requirements for a bull, Boston wants good yearling and weaning weights. Of course, with a 100% Prime goal, marbling is also among the criteria.

Past yearling weights ranged from 700 pounds (lb.) to 1,100 lb. — a spread too

large for his liking. With an aggressive culling strategy and focus on expected progeny differences (EPDs) on both the paternal and maternal side, Boston is looking forward to better results with the 2008 calf crop.

“We’ve got to sell the poor cows and replace them with something that will grow better calves,” he says. “EPDs are the answer.”

Producing for the high-quality natural cattle market has shown Boston that growth

implants are not necessary to make cattle perform.

“Hormones are really just making up for a poor-quality animal,” he says. Through careful recordkeeping, Boston has been able to select for superior genetics in place of using the implants.

John Tarpoff, head of the CAB Natural program for Niman Ranch, has worked with the Illinois producer for 10 years.

“Boston has done a phenomenal job from an animal husbandry standpoint,” he says, listing attention to “all three of the most important points of cattle production — genetics, feed and environment. He’s done

everything he needs to do and the results show it," Tarpoff says.

Calving know-how

Another example of that is the farm's science-backed calving protocol. Boston sorts off cows that are close to calving and moves them to the barn directly behind his house. There, cows are turned out to feed on forage for 12 hours each night, and penned away from the hay each morning. That ensures most of the calves will arrive during the day.

"Last year we had less than 5% of the cows calve at night," Boston says.

Mother and calf spend 24 hours in one of 11 calving pens inside the barn before moving to a separate cow-calf pen outside. Then the calf is treated, castrated, processed through a recordkeeping system and tagged. Cleanliness is of utmost importance throughout the entire process to prevent the spread of *E. coli*.

Boston is adding on to his barn to provide more room for the cows and calves.

"We want them all to calve inside," he says. Within three days of birth, pairs move back to the pasture with shelters for calves to access during bad weather.

"If a calf is 4 days or older, it will have

enough sense to stay inside the shelters during bad weather. If it is younger than that the cow can call it out," he says.

Attention to those details illustrates the firm commitment to quality production.

"A lot of people cut corners, but Boston does it right from start to finish," Tarpoff says. "You can see it in his final product."

Boston takes pride in his part in pleasing consumers.

"I like producing high-quality cattle," he says.

