

The Quality Sort

Decatur County Feed Yard wins Quality Focus Award.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

It doesn't take too many feedyard tours to realize they are, by nature, dirty places. Mud and manure and wear and tear just come with the territory. But don't tell that to the staff at the 40,000-head Decatur County Feed Yard, near Oberlin, Kan.

There the fences are painted, grass is mowed and weeds are kept at bay. The chute is practically clean enough to eat off of, and it's that way regardless of day of the week or who is coming to visit.

Such attention to detail helped the feedlot earn Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) honors for 2010. Owners Warren and Carol Weibert will travel to the CAB annual conference, Oct. 1 in Puerto Rico, to accept the Quality Focus Award for yards larger than 15,000 head.

This recognition is given to the feedyard with the highest *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance among all licensees in the same category. Decatur hit 32.5% CAB and Prime on all enrolled cattle from June 1, 2009, through May 31 of this year.

"It's a matter of paying attention to all the details, whether it's mowing or feeding or riding pens," says Warren Weibert. "We just try to do the best we can every day, and it works out in the end."



PHOTO COURTESY OF WARREN AND CAROL WEIBERT

► Paying attention to every detail helped Warren Weibert and the Decatur County Feed Yard earn the Quality Focus Award.



► Attention to detail — from cleanliness and upkeep of facilities to data interpretation — have earned Decatur County Feed Yard customer loyalty and CAB accolades.

Precise sorting and focused procurement help them home in on the goal of increased profitability.

"We're on the lookout for ranchers who want to know more about the bottom line and sharing information," Weibert says.

Dan Dorn, supply development manager, adds, "You're out of the commodity business and in the value-added business when you come here."

Individual animal management

The company started working toward individual animal management in 1986, when it began using a scale under the chute and adding ultrasound to the mix.

"Nobody was thinking about it back then," Weibert says. "From there it's just been a natural progression as we invested in high-tech cattle management and data collection."

At the heart is the Micro Beef Technologies sorting system they implemented in 1994. It consists of a typical "snake alley," crowding tub, specialized chute, a computer and a program designed to run it all.

"It's built for animal welfare," Dorn says, noting the white panels for blocking noise

and light. "As the cattle come through, it's pretty natural."

Weight, electronic identification (eID), and ultrasound for backfat and ribeye data are all collected in a matter of seconds. That might sound complicated, but Weibert and Dorn say the combination of technology and well-trained employees makes it run smoothly.

"Anybody who has come to work for us understands this is who we are and what we do," Weibert says. "Literally every animal in the yard goes through that system. It's standard operating procedure. It's routine."

Dorn says the system alleviates some traditional sorting challenges.

"The computer opens and closes the gates based on what it tells us," he says. "There's no yelling. We can move more cattle through than most people can because it's designed for better flow, less labor."

It's also designed for more information, and Dorn says their customers use that data to affect change. He humbly gives credit to those cattlemen for the feedyard's high CAB acceptance rate, which is 10 points above the industry average.

“It all goes back to the genetics that will bring back the high-quality, premium products,” he says. “We focus on the top-performing producers. Just by mining the data some producers have added up to \$300 per head to their bottom line since they started here in the ’90s. It changes their herds.”

Precision appreciated

Those same customers say it’s Decatur’s attention to detail that makes all the difference.

Mike Healy, LU Ranch, of Worland, Wyo., sends most of his calf crop to the feedyard each year. He says that precision was apparent back in 1996 when he got his first impressions.

“The cleanliness of the operation was noticeably different,” he says, describing the alleys, scale and bunks as “spotless.”

The observation illustrates an overriding theme, Healy says.

“It shows a method of operation that you will find in all parts of the business,” he says. “Maintaining the mounds makes for a more contented, healthy animal. Because of the way they keep their equipment up, you know the way they will get the feed to the animal will be prompt. You know it will be good feed. It just gives you a good impression of everything else you can expect from them.”

Healy says those high standards have been met and exceeded. In his first year with Decatur the corn market skyrocketed, but Decatur’s individual management helped get the cattle out of the yard before they ate more than they were worth.

“That was a hit on their business, because their business is keeping pens full and feeding for as long as they can. They were looking out for me and trying to minimize my losses,” he says.



► Supply Development Manager Dan Dorn helps customers sort genetics. “We sort the data worst to best, because we want the producer to look at that page first. You’ll make the most rapid change if you look at the bottom 20% of your herd,” he says.

From there, Healy started to send an increasingly larger share of his cattle to Decatur. Another benefit is the ability to seamlessly move data from the feedyard to the ranch.

“I don’t have to load it by hand, so it makes it easier to discover these cattle that produce discounts,” Healy says, noting he downloads the feedyard information right into his computer program. “We try to eliminate cows that are costing us money and then change our genetics on an overall basis.

“It’s funny, every time you make a change, it’s like arriving at a new plateau and you look around and all you see are more changes you have to make,” he says.

Dorn says it’s these kind of motivated producers who have helped the feedyard move from 6.81% CAB acceptance in 2004 to the over 30% the past two years.

“You have to drill down and mine the data. You have to figure out which genetics do work and which ones don’t,” he says. “We sort the data worst to best, because we want the producer to look at that page first. You’ll make the most rapid change if you look at the bottom 20% of your herd.”

He hopes to attract more Angus producers to the feedyard, especially breeders.

“Every seedstock producer needs to be feeding cattle in the real world. They really do,” Dorn says. “We’ll partner with them or they need to buy some customer cattle, but they need to be feeding cattle.”

Then they need to evaluate that information to make changes for their customers, the feeders and the greater beef industry.

“Our packer partners are after high-quality-grading cattle, but we’ve got to have some muscle in them and they have to be efficient,” Dorn says. “There are straightbred Angus cattle that fit all those windows, but the key is finding the genetics that work. They’re out there, and we wish we knew where they were.”

If that sounds like an invitation to join in the value discovery and profit opportunities, it is.



► Straightbred Angus cattle can fit all the windows, says Dan Dorn. The key is finding the genetics out there.

Editor’s Note: Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

