

Featured Feedlot:

Hays Feeders LLC

CAB partner in customer success for 10 years.

Story by **Julie Vrazel**; photos by **Gary Fike**



Knowledge and dedication, combined with passion, comprise just the right formula. Just ask Bill Sleigh, manager of Hays Feeders LLC.

“Success is a combination of high-quality cattle fed with the right ration and marketed at the right time in the right way,” he says. The staff works long hours to get there, but they don’t mind doing what benefits customers.

Located near Hays, Kan., the feedlot opened in the late 1960s, and was purchased by Pratt Feeders LLC in 1999. It became licensed with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) the next year, but 10 years is less than a quarter of the feedlot’s history of continuous operation. One recent difference is the greater knowledge resource available today.



“We provide all the information we can to our customers, and it helps to get the data reviews from CAB,” Sleigh says. “Being part of the Pratt Feeders group, we also gain from everything learned at all four yards.”

A relative newcomer now in his third year, Sleigh is certainly no rookie. He brings nearly 30 years of experience along, from commercial and seedstock cow-calf ranching to feedlot

management in Texas. Many on the team at Hays Feeders have been there for more than a decade, so customers always find a familiar face.

Honesty matters

Over the years, many strong relationships have been built across all sectors. Maintaining and nurturing them for so long with so much money on the line comes down to one core value: honesty. “Customers have to trust us to take care of their cattle and do what is best for them,” Sleigh says.

Harrison, Neb., ranch customer John Geiser agrees that’s what it takes, and that’s what he gets. Hundreds of miles away, he can’t afford to check up on the calves he sends to Hays.

“With me being in Nebraska, I have to trust Bill to feed them and market them,” he says. “And they’ve always done a good job



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with my cattle.” At 14,000-head capacity, Hays Feeders could be considered a mid-size feedlot, but it functions in many ways as a small yard.

“I get a lot of personal attention,” Geiser says.

Sleigh says it’s important to have close relationships with the people whose trust they earn in Montana, Ohio, Tennessee,

Missouri, Kentucky, Illinois, Oklahoma and Nebraska — to name a few states in the customer base.

“They can call and talk to me or another person they are familiar with,” he says. “Whether they feed 20 or 2,000 head, they know they can talk to me.”

Communication

Sleigh and the Hays staff work to reach the ultimate goal of earning money for their customers. But that takes work on everyone’s part.

Phones are ringing constantly, whether they are in the office or out in the yard. But, that’s a good thing. This strong communication helps Hays Feeders get the most out of all cattle, while keeping the team on track.

“When the phone rings, it could be a new customer, old customer or a fellow staff member needing guidance or telling me about a problem that needs a quick solution,” Sleigh explains. “It means we’re keeping up a strong line of communication with each other and with our customers. No one gets left behind.”

Each day brings new learning experiences to everyone involved with the feedyard. “We have learned that quality matters with the calves you are feeding, and that goes back to genetics and their herd health program. So, we strive to make sure that our producers have the best program to allow their cattle to market at their best,” Sleigh says.

Partnering for facts

The percentage of high-quality cattle wasn’t always high at Hays Feeders, but Sleigh has seen a significant increase. “We like to feed a good one, and it’s an added benefit for everyone when it’s black, especially Angus-type,” he says. When closeouts are available, he provides the data to customers, along with a few suggestions. He uses different scenarios to fit each individual’s operation.

As a CAB partner feedlot, Hays Feeders goes the extra mile to provide carcass data, performance records and feed efficiency results. Sleigh looks at the latter as a vital factor in the beef industry, and says, “We’re all about getting the most money for our customers.”

Some of those customers retain ownership. “Some we partner with,” Sleigh says. Even if they retain no share of ownership, he likes to provide the data and other feedback so the cattle can get better over time.

“We can look at genetics and health programs, as well as other strategies to improve the customer’s herd,” he says. Among those other tips, Sleigh has helped them incorporate more efficient

backgrounding techniques along with focused breeding programs.

“The customer’s cattle are treated like our cattle; if we see room for improvements, we suggest them and use the factual evidence as proof of our concern or praise,” he explains.

Imogene Latimer, Shelbyville, Mo., veterinarian and producer, uses the data to help select the right bulls for her Angus-based cow herd. “I listen to Bill’s suggestions, and find other ways to apply the data to our herd, too,” she says.

Efficient quality

CAB’s Gary Fike, beef cattle specialist, credits the Hays Feeders team for working on the key combination of feed efficiency and quality.

“Bill and his staff use ‘delayed implant’ strategies that will optimize both feedlot performance and quality grade,” Fike says. “By balancing these two outcomes, their customers benefit in several ways. They earn extra carcass premiums without sacrificing average daily gain and feed efficiency, so, ultimately, they have a very competitive cost of gain.”

Over the years, the staff has learned the importance of projecting how each calf will feed. Sleigh says that helps in the marketing decisions and overall profitability. “They’re all valuable, no matter what color or breed they are, but some breeds just excel over others. You learn what’s more beneficial for the producer and for you,” he says.

With easy access on Interstate 70 and a favorable corn market, the feedlot location has many advantages. “We’re relatively near to major packers — especially Tyson, Cargill and U.S. Premium Beef/National — and since we’re close to Nebraska, we have a better corn market than a lot of Kansas,” Sleigh says. The yard’s terrain also provides excellent drainage to help keep the cattle comfortable while they gain.

The feedlot has enrolled more than 40,000 head since licensing, and won a CAB annual conference award a few years ago. The long-term average CAB acceptance rate is 13.9%, but that had picked up to 25% by 2008.

Being CAB licensed helps Hays Feeders, from providing carcass data to increased premiums for the calves. “Certified Angus Beef has done a tremendous amount for the Angus breed and the beef industry,” Sleigh says. “It’s a win for everyone: customers, consumers and all.”

