



The Angus Connection in Hereford



Feeder's ingenuity, pace and effectiveness earn CAB award.

Story & photos by **Larry Stalcup**

Scott Keeling wants the best in performance and carcass quality from cattle that don't waste time or feed. His Keeling Cattle Feeders yard, licensed with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) for little more than a year, sets a great example for those goals.

You could say Keeling wasted no time in moving up within the CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP), but Texas Angus producers had long recognized those merits. In fact, they urged Keeling to align his Hereford, Texas, yard with CAB in 2007.

Steve Knoll, a nearby member of the Texas Angus Association board of directors, thought Keeling would be a good fit for the FLP.

"Scott always had an outstanding business approach to running a feedyard," Knoll says. "I knew he had a great work ethic and did a quality job."

Keeling had followed CAB's rise to leadership in the industry, but he knew that

only a few quality-focused feeders were licensed. "I admired how CAB has protected that brand," he says.

Even more, he liked the idea of getting carcass data from every animal enrolled through the FLP.

"Before, if a customer wanted carcass data, cattle would have to be sold grade and yield or on a grid. Then, maybe you would receive the data," Keeling says. "With CAB, I can provide producers

with data on everything we enroll, regardless of how we sell."

Of course, the application was quickly approved.

"We're excited about what Scott is offering to producers," says Gary Fike, beef cattle specialist for the brand. "Licensing has given him the opportunity to work more closely with customers who have quality on their minds."

As the longstanding quality focus met

with further CAB opportunities, Keeling made the most of them for his customers, who enrolled nearly 5,000 head in the first year. Confirmed as a spark plug in the Angus breed's rapid growth in Texas and surrounding states, Keeling's ingenuity, pace and effectiveness won the 2008 CAB Progressive Partner Award.

Experienced hand

His enthusiasm for quality in the face of record feed prices and market volatility is tempered by long experience. Keeling and I.J. Tow bought the yard from a feed company back in 1985. Managing it from Day 1, Keeling bought out the partner in 1994, and he and wife Karen are sole owners. He's a past chairman of the Texas Cattle Feeders Association (TCFA), from which he maintains annual Beef Safety and Quality AssuranceSM certification.

The feedyard has grown to 17,000-head capacity, with a steam-flaking mill that was refurbished in the 1990s and upgraded regularly since then. Some employees have been on staff for 20 years or more, and

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Progressive Partner of the Year

consulting nutritionists and veterinarians help Keeling develop programs to fit each customer and their cattle.

Customer development has been one of Keeling's assets; his repeat feeders have been coming back for years.

"Most of the cattle we feed come from Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico," Keeling notes. "We also feed 'outsourced' cattle from Mississippi, which include some from other southern states.

"We're very hands-on here and work closely with our customers," he says. "Many have a comfort level of knowing what they can expect from us."

Taking to heart the lessons from the Texas Ranch-to-Rail steer feedout, Keeling became an early believer in working to help producers establish good practices on the ranch.

"We emphasize to ranchers that calves in a good preconditioning VAC-45 (value-added calf weaned 45 days) type of program will face less stress when they are taken from the ranch environment and arrive at the feedyard," he says. "The less we have to do for them here, the better quality of animal you'll have at the end."

Greater opportunity

As a CAB partner yard, Keeling has seen more chances to feed Angus cattle. Nearly



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30% of those on feed were predominantly Angus by this summer. "CAB helps raise the quality of the whole yard," he says, noting that half of his pens show at least 50% Angus influence. "Packer buyers can't help seeing the high percentage; that says quality."

It's a win-win-win deal, Fike says. "And Scott saw that right away. He's forging ahead with the core of what we try to do. Through his own procurement and feeding strategies, he's building links between registered Angus producers and their customers, then sharing the feedlot and carcass data for improvement next time around."

Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) acceptance rates have been as high as 45% in some harvest groups connected with known Angus genetics, but there have also been many pens that came in at 5% CAB.

"It's all a discovery process as we get started," he says. "Some customers have a lot of work to do on grade, others need to work on growth and efficiency or all three, but the data shows us what to work on."

Knoll has already seen advantages in his neighbor becoming a CAB-licensed feedlot. "It's another opportunity for me to reach out to customers looking for good Angus genetics to go into a feedyard, who want to work together and hit the CAB target," he says.

The custom feedyard tradition of "partnering" on cattle with the ranch has become more popular with CAB customers.

"We've always promoted partnering," Keeling says, "usually 50-50 or with the ranch owning two-thirds of the cattle."

The growing popularity of the AngusSource® program, which includes genotypic CAB eligibility for all tagged calves, has resulted in more Angus cattle being fed at Keeling, too. "I'd be happy with just receiving the carcass data," Keeling says. "But I'm seeing more people feed here because I'm a licensed yard."

While he sees more company-owned cattle due to tighter margins across the industry, Keeling says CAB's unique networking and data feedback program can provide the means for small- or large-scale producers to benefit more from their genetics.

That reminds him of the many ways to win.

"With CAB customers, we can usually expect good overall performance because of what they've done at the ranch. Their cattle are probably going to feed a little better than most," he says. "That's a benefit for both of us."



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