

Angus Capital

Keeling Cattle Feeders shares data and family-style connections.

by **Wyatt Bechtel & Steve Suther**

If you could find a high spot and a clear day around Hereford, Texas, you might see half a million cattle from the “Beef Capital of the World.” There are that many more within 50 miles.

This is home to some giant feeding companies. It’s also home to one of the best. Keeling Cattle Feeders, a few miles west of town, is barely into the “big yard” category among Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed partners. But it earned recognition as the CAB 2011 Feedlot Partner of the Year for all yards with more than 15,000-head capacity. Owners Scott and Karen Keeling accepted the award at the CAB annual conference in Sunriver, Ore., Sept. 22-24.

Their 17,000-head feedlot is working its way to becoming the Angus Capital of Texas. When it joined CAB in 2007, perhaps one-quarter of the cattle were Angus-type, and the



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3,500 enrolled managed just 9.6% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance. Last year, nearly doubling the share of Angus cattle in the yard, Keeling enrolled 6,200 head that made 21% CAB, well above the Texas average.

That kind of progress doesn’t just happen — not without an overall commitment to quality. Becoming a CAB partner added an Angus focus to that longtime commitment.

“We changed our whole business over the last few years,” Keeling says.

Risk management has been increasingly important as the feedlot moved up from 25% to 50% cattle ownership while upgrading animal type. Oldest son Tyler has been a big help in that regard. He’s a commodity broker in Amarillo, and with wife Trudy, they are the parents of the Keelings’ only grandchild, Reid.

Second-oldest son Levi is a feedlot-operations major in a nearby junior college, and Tom, the youngest at 13, is just getting into the junior-high school years with lots of activities. The Keelings always made time to attend local sporting events for the sons, who span 16 years in age, devoting time to teach life’s lessons along with golf and fly fishing.

Karen took off a few years to focus on the family but came back to work at the yard four years ago.

“I don’t delegate well, but she knows our program so that we can share some tasks,” Keeling says.



Feedlot Partner of the Year
>15,000 head

Keeling worked for two of the biggest area cattle feeders when starting out in the early 1980s; then the couple went in with a partner to buy the 5,500-head yard from a feed company in 1985. After expanding that to current size, they bought full ownership in 1994. The operation includes 2,500 acres of farmland, as well.

Enjoyable work

“I really enjoy what I do — a lot,” Keeling says. “That’s good, because it’s pretty demanding; you better like it.”

One of the many aspects he enjoys is helping ranchers discover and improve the genetic potential in their cattle. Local members of the Texas Angus Association (TAA) had urged him to become a CAB partner and subsequently helped organize a TAA value-discovery project.

After just one year of building such relationships, Keeling was honored as 2008 CAB Progressive Partner of the Year. That effort continues.

“We work with a lot of Texas seedstock folks, and I think we are all learning,” Keeling



► Named CAB’s Feedlot Partner of the Year for yards with greater than 15,000 head capacity, Scott and Karen Keeling went in with a partner to buy the yard in 1985, purchasing full ownership in 1994.

PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

says. "Of course, they sell mostly bulls, so we are dealing with pretty small lots that vary year-to-year. Then there's the weather and grading effects. Sometimes it's like trying to nail Jell-O® to the wall, but that's part of what I like about our business."

He also likes the results, as real opportunities get nailed down, herds improve and everybody from rancher to consumer wins. And Keeling likes networking with others who like these things.

The ability to collect more carcass data through CAB was the main draw in 2007, Keeling says. "Since then, I've picked up a whole lot more. There's a circle of friends that comes with being a CAB partner."

Making friends comes naturally for the Keelings, who seem to know everyone in Hereford, the nearby city of 15,000. Their children grew up with those of state and nationally prominent Angus customers Steve Knoll and Steve Olson.

Customer friends

"Those relationships have only gotten stronger with our CAB affiliation," Keeling says.

With a million cattle in the area, Olson certainly had his choice of feeders, but none suited him as well as Keeling.

"I started feeding with him when he was a CAB-licensed yard," Olson says. "I wanted to use somebody who could go through the system and get data back on our own calves we were raising and feeding," he says.

That decision is now paying off because of Keeling's hands-on approach.

"The feedlot is the right size to give personal attention," Olson says. "He's involved himself in the marketing and feeding. He knows what's going on in his yard, and that is a plus to me."

Of course, Keeling likes happy customers and works hard to keep them.

"When we're sharing data and common goals, it's worth more to both of us to keep making progress," he says. That's why customer satisfaction is a primary goal.

Earl Wayne Reese, Henrietta, Texas, is one example. Data and a quest for simplicity recently moved him to use only registered Angus bulls, replacing a Charolais battery. He stays in regular contact with his friend and partner of 15 years.

The 300 miles separating them is not that much of a barrier; they even go fly fishing together.

"I travel up there regularly, at least three to four times a year, just to check on the cattle,"

Reese says. "I've never been disappointed, ever."

Of the nearly 700 cattle Reese feeds annually, the only pen that was completely Angus-sired went better than 40% CAB. Admittedly "a little bit disappointed" the number was not higher, Reese talked it over with Keeling and redoubled his Angus focus this year.

"The American Angus Association has so many more incentives to feed calves, so I decided to switch over to a commercial Angus cow herd with purebred bulls," he says.

A wider circle

The circle of friends extends beyond the cattle and ranching fields, thanks in part to the CAB connection. Keeling Cattle Feeders has served as a tour stop for chefs from big cities and other beef specialists who want to learn more about the products they sell, prepare and serve.

"We do a lot of things like that; we're really transparent with what we do, and I love to show it to people, especially people like that who are interested in what you have," Keeling says. "They ask good questions and appreciate what you're doing."

He served as a "myth buster" for growth implants during a spring tour.

"There is nothing against a natural product, and there is nothing against beef when we use implants," he told the group. "If you want to go with natural, go natural, but don't do it because you think implants are bad."

With the growing market interest, however, Keeling says he may consider putting in shades in one alley to conform to requirements for that niche.

Leading tour groups through the steam-flaking feedmill, Keeling had technical



PHOTO BY JILL DUNKEL

► Customer Earl Wayne Reese of Henrietta, Texas, counts on the Keelings to supply data to help him deliver on a quality focus. Incentives from the American Angus Association encouraged him to switch to a commercial Angus cow herd, using purebred Angus bulls.

company representatives on hand to help explain the micro-portions per ton of feed when antibiotics are included.

"We showed them our cattle, from the CAB-enrolled to the No. 2 Mexicans, how they're all part of the cattle business, but we focused on the Angus cattle," he says. "Then we had a nice area where we grilled hamburgers for lunch. It was a fun deal."

Just like every day for this model feedlot with its transparent advocacy and growing circle of friends.

"We're proud of what we've done here, but I'm real proud of what the industry is doing and where it is going as a whole," Keeling says.

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