

Local Beef Feeds the World

Nebraska rancher and feed dealer
knows where it all starts.

Story & photos by **Anthony Pannone**



► [Cutline](#)

Pat Laird drives past his feed store and other shops in Cozad, Neb., headed out to his pasture gate as the sun creeps out of bed to illuminate the sky. His cows bask in the summer dawn, their calves' blackness standing out against the greenery.

One hundred commercial Angus cows live there, a stone's throw from Interstate 80. Semitrailers and all types of autos zoom by at all hours. The black cattle seem oblivious, some shuffling, some munching. But they shoot glances toward the dusty, white pickup as it stops and Laird opens the gate.

Everything in the picture makes sense, as much as the marketing plan for weaning day in the fall. That's when Laird knows he will load calves on a truck and ship them to the nearest feedyard. The Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) partner yard Will Feed Inc. sits just 5 miles down the road.

Local agriculture takes on its true meaning in Cozad. The relationship between Laird and feedlot manager Anne Burkholder has developed through the years. He doesn't remember exactly when he first sold cattle to her, but it has probably been seven years. She has bought them every year since, while

returning information to help him improve the next calves.

When Laird's calves arrive, Burkholder maintains a holistic, proactive approach as if they were Olympic athletes training at high altitude.

"I can't believe she'll go out and exercise those calves," he says. "But I think it helps clean their lungs."

And he respects what she does. As calves settle into their new surroundings, Burkholder gets to know them and walks with them up and down the yard alley. Laird says it makes sense to engage them that way.

"It makes too much sense, and that's why she is unique," he says. "We have been doing this out here for how many, a hundred years? A change up like that, it takes an outsider to see it almost." Burkholder grew up in Florida and attended college in New Hampshire.

Laird tosses pelleted treats to his calves and talks about his own learning curve. Taking care of business means taking care of his family and learning about his cattle, as well. The operation has to be easy to manage, because he splits time between being a cattleman and managing a feed dealership.

Roots in Cozad

He grew up in the feed business and started the Purina dealership where his dad, mom and son work side by side as a family, in a town where nearly everybody seems like family.

Living so close to his feeder means he visits any time he pleases, almost like the yard was the next shop on the street. Burkholder



► **Above:** For Pat Laird, taking care of business means taking care of his family and learning about his cattle, as well. The operation has to be easy to manage, because he splits time between being a cattleman and managing a feed dealership.

tells him when the cattle are ready to go to market.

“Everything is tight-knit, you know; everything is right here,” he says. Right here means Cozad, where great-granddad Laird homesteaded more than 100 years ago. “The roots here run pretty deep.”

He talks about his operation before he partnered with Burkholder, selling at a local auction and knowing the only way to receive carcass data was to retain ownership on feed. Now, no matter what, he gets carcass data.

“It’s been a good relationship with Anne, and I like that she is very conscientious about the herd environment and how she treats the calves when they are there,” he says. “It’s important to me they go to a good home when they leave my home. I don’t have to worry.”

A lifelong rancher teaming up with a feedlot greenhorn — that’s what Burkholder was at first — might seem like a bad business move. But the relationship goes back years, when he sold grain and hay to Burkholder’s father-in-law.

“Typically, for someone to be good in the cattle business you have to be raised in it,” he admits. “It’s a tribute to her that she’s made a success, because that doesn’t happen very often.”

Shortly after she proved her way into the manager position at the family yard, Burkholder decided to buy local calves with known backgrounds. “She wants to know where the calves originate,” Laird says. “I think the old mentality was to fill the lots with whatever could be found.”

Laird’s day job has only a little influence on how he feeds his cattle. He creep-feeds because the forage by the river is cool-season

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and its nutritional value decreases as the summer progresses, not because he has a feed store. Using Accuration® in the creep is practical and done because of the resources available.

Relationships

Laird’s brother, Tom, also ranches with an Angus herd of 50, not far away in the Nebraska Sandhills. They calved together for several years until the brothers decided to change directions, and Laird decided to calve later due to weather. Today the operations are coordinated so that Tom calves in early March, a month before his brother.

For them, it’s always been Angus because the breed is minimalistic in material needs. “They exist on their own,” Laird says. “I can’t spend a lot of time with them, and I don’t have to.”

Carcass quality is important to his feeder and does not interfere with that problem-free aspect of Angus, so it’s become more important to Laird.

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And Will Feed makes it clear they will feed those cattle again, willingly.

“She is back every year to buy them,” Laird says. “I know when she comes back that tells me I must be doing something right.”

He doesn’t implant with the spring shots but gives a seven-way blackleg and bovine respiratory vaccine, strategizing with

Burkholder to make sure not to double up on vaccines. “She’ll say, ‘Well, I’ll get this shot if you’ll get that shot.’” And he keeps records to cut down on the duplication that can cost time and money.

Laird likes to know what he sells, and that’s the one area where the feed business enters into the ranch. When a new Purina product comes out, he’ll try it just to make sure it does what it says it should do. “It’s all about developing a relationship, and I think that happens when you know what you are talking about.”

He recognizes the demand for high-quality beef is about that kind of promise keeping. When he buys a steak, he wants that ideal taste and tenderness for the best price, but he worries sometimes that folks who buy lower quality don’t know what they’re missing. If he dwells on worries, his thoughts turn to those adversaries who don’t know his life or goals.

“They don’t know what we’re doing,” he says. “And that’s the tough part, getting our story out and what it means.”

But whether admiring his calves as he tosses them another handful of pellets or thinking ahead to carcass data, breeding decisions or even that ultimate steak, Laird keeps the faith. “You have to have an end product that people want. That’s why we’re all in the business.”



Editor’s Note: Anthony Panonne is an industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.