

A Dream for the Industry

Pratt Feeders wins CAB 2010 Feedlot Partner of the Year for feedlots with capacities of 15,000 or more.

Story & photos by **Lyndee Patterson**

Many people dream of winning a vacation to a tropical island. They want to be far from the daily grind of normal life with its work and worries. Except for the very lucky few, however, that's just not going to happen.

Jerry Bohn and his wife, Julie, won a trip to Puerto Rico courtesy of Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) — but it had nothing to do with luck. As the general manager of Pratt Feeders, Bohn will attend the CAB annual conference in the island capital of San Juan to accept the 2010 Feedlot Partner of the Year Award for 15,000-head capacity or more.

If Bohn and the staff at Pratt Feeders have a common dream, it's a vision of a more

cooperative, profitable beef industry that works together to meet consumer demand. Progress toward that goal does not go unnoticed.

"We're honored CAB chose us to receive this award," Bohn says. "We enjoy working with the company and believe the relationship is beneficial for both of us."

Pratt Feeders has enrolled a fairly steady 16,000-17,000 head in the program each year since first winning this award in 2004, but the share of cattle reaching *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) acceptance has nearly doubled. This year alone they supplied more than 3,700 head for the brand.

Charting data on more than 105,000 head during the seven years Pratt has been a CAB

partner includes "comparison pens" of average cattle as well as high-percentage Angus cattle. From June 2009 through the end of May, 24.7% of the enrolled cattle made CAB and Prime at harvest.

Bohn maintains a focus on performance, committed to improving the quality of cattle on feed. "We want to be known as a place that's in the top level, if not the very best from a cattle-feeding standpoint," he says.

There is no easy, step-by-step path to being "the best." Constant change in the industry, fluctuations in the market or other day-to-day issues keep it from being that simple.

Facing challenges

One challenge affecting the entire industry is the excess pen space compared to the number of feeder cattle available. The inventory of cattle and calves on farms in the United States has decreased by almost 4.5 million head in the past 10 years.

That's partly because of the improvement in cattle genetics, Bohn says.

"Some of the poorer genetics and plainer-quality cattle are going by the wayside," he says. "Producers can zero in on the traits that are going to make



► **Above:** Pratt Feeders General Manager Jerry Bohn maintains a focus on performance, committed to improving the quality of cattle on feed. "We want to be known as a place that's in the top level, if not the very best from a cattle-feeding standpoint," he says.

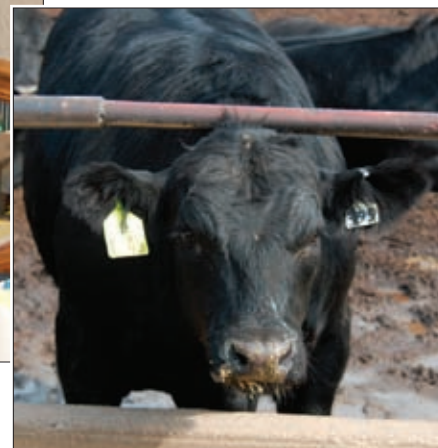
► **Right:** Pratt Feeders has enrolled a fairly steady 16,000-17,000 head in the program each year since first winning this award in 2004.





►**Left:** Dave Latta, assistant manager at Pratt, spends most of his time securing feeder cattle for the yard and marketing the finished cattle, but he also helps clients get what they need from the feedlot.

►**Below:** Customers own nearly 85% to 90% of the cattle at Pratt; with numbers like that, customer satisfaction becomes a matter of the utmost importance.



money by raising higher-quality cattle that fulfill the beef consumers' needs."

The decrease in cattle numbers may be linked to positive genetic developments, but it still makes it hard to fill pens. "There is a lot of competition for a restricted number of feeder cattle," Bohn says. "It looks like it will continue to get worse as cow numbers go down."

Because that has made it harder to buy cattle in the spot market, Pratt Feeders has begun contracting more aggressively on the futures market. "That's worked out pretty well," Bohn says. "The market gives you nuggets of opportunity. You just have to search them out and grab onto them."

To remain competitive and able to get the

cattle they need, precise management must take priority.

Taking care of details

"First, our management teams have to work doubly hard to make sure we're taking care of the cattle correctly and feeding them as efficiently as possible," Bohn says.

Some of those intensive strategies include structured attention to detail and employee training. The ability to properly handle cattle or accurately deliver feed can easily be taught, and the training greatly improves efficiency, Bohn says. "They also need to have the proper equipment to do their jobs correctly."

Building relationships with customers and cattle suppliers is another step. "When they get ready to feed or sell their cattle, we want them to think of Pratt Feeders."

Customers own nearly 85% to 90% of the cattle at Pratt; with numbers like that, customer satisfaction becomes a matter of the utmost importance.

In many other feedlots, most of the cattle are owned by the companies.

"Some of them like it because they have absolute control and don't have to deal with any clients, but we've taken a different approach," Bohn says. "We prefer to embrace and develop our customer relationships rather than having to own so many cattle ourselves."

Before trying to attract new customers, the staff does everything possible to satisfy long-time clients and keep them coming back.

Regular contact and open communication lines are essential.

"We encourage them to participate in the process by inquiring about their cattle," Bohn

says. "And that's a two-way street. We try to call them periodically and keep them informed."

Details are sent out once a month. Customers can see their bill and other data such as daily pounds of feed per head, veterinary charges and even estimates of cattle weights.

"It's a way for us to let them know we haven't forgotten about them," Bohn says.

Customer satisfaction

The regular contact is important to customers, but they also need to be pleased with how their cattle perform. Bill and Judy Lee have a large, commercial Angus ranch 25 miles southwest of Pratt, near Coats, Kan. They have sent cattle to the yard for a dozen years and were recognized with the 2010 CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award.

"If you're going to build a superior product and go through the expense of creating those genetics, it takes a feedlot willing to do what Pratt Feeders has done for us," Bill says.

"They do a wonderful job sorting," Judy says. "When we first started feeding cattle, other feedlots would sell a whole pen at one time, and the calves would grade all over the board because many were too big or too small. But each truckload Pratt sends is sorted to optimize Choice or Choice and Prime."

The cowboys at the feedlot are responsible for picking the cattle that are ready for harvest. "These calf crops don't often finish

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evenly, so we do a lot of sorting in the late spring,” Bohn says.

Dave Latta, assistant manager at Pratt, spends most of his time securing feeder cattle for the yard and marketing the finished cattle, but he also helps clients get what they need from the feedlot.

“We joint-venture with a lot of customers that want us to own a percentage of the cattle,” Latta says. “At that point we’ve all got some stake in making them perform to expectations, and that makes customers more comfortable and willing to buy them.”

Customers have options of financing cattle and feed, and they can develop a risk-management plan as well.

Bohn and Latta want to help them get the most money possible for their cattle. As the number of customers retaining ownership on high-quality calves has gone up at the feedyard, the team assists them in selling on grids to realize the value of their genetics and management.

Customers are encouraged to age- and source-verify their cattle to qualify for basic but often lucrative premiums.

“The process isn’t that daunting,” Bohn says. “I think some of them get overwhelmed or don’t want to go to the effort, but if they don’t, it costs them money.”

Eye on the customer

To fill the yard with cattle, Pratt Feeders must satisfy its clients. But it takes more: To also sustain the demand for beef, Bohn and company aim to satisfy the beef consumer.

“Consumer perception of our industry is not what we would like it to be,” he says.

To address that issue, employees and staff go through training such as the Masters of Beef Advocacy (MBA) program to improve that image.

“We are challenging our consultants, vets and nutritionists to help us use technology that will be more environmentally friendly and beneficial to the animals, too,” Bohn says.

He cautions the industry to be careful as well.

“We can’t beat ourselves up, promoting one type of beef product compared to another — all beef is healthy, but there are alternate ways of producing it.”

Everyone involved in producing beef should take responsibility for helping create a positive image for the cattle industry, Bohn says. “We feed beef to consumers, and we want them to have a good eating experience.”

That’s best accomplished with a consistent, high-quality product. Through his work with CAB, Bohn has been able to share large amounts of data with his customers and in a more general sense, people all across the industry. That can help improve the quality of cattle everywhere. Improved genetics will not only make it easier to produce the kind of cattle that fulfill feedyard demands, but it will also get them closer to ensuring consumer satisfaction.

“It’s a small thing we should do,” Bohn says. “We need to give producers the tools to make better decisions that will ultimately help our industry.”



Editor’s Note: Lyndee Patterson is industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.