

CAB Featured Feedlot series:

History Meets Precision

This ninth-generation family farm keeps up a tradition of responsibility to customers and community.

by *Lindsay Domer*

For 254 years, the Hess family of Lancaster, Pa., has lived on Silver Run Farm, purchased from the sons of William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania and a champion of religious tolerance. For half of those years, they have fattened cattle in pens emanating from the massive 1862 bank barn.

Neighbors grew plentiful during the years. By the time the farm became a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot in 2000, its 250 acres of cropland bordered 50 homes, two schools and a retirement community. Few farms can persevere under such a virtual microscope, but Silver Run has thrived with a combination of diversity, precision and transparency.

Being a good neighbor to so many requires premium environmental stewardship. Karl and Elma Hess take that personally, as the eighth generation, helping the ninth get started.

“Stewardship means taking care of something for someone else. It means doing what is right when no one else but you and God would know any different,” Karl Hess says.

His college degrees in chemistry and biology help in knowing what is right for the land, livestock and neighbors. A lifelong learning quest and appreciation for the meticulous led Hess to become state-certified to write nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) nutrient control programs for Silver Run and other area farms.

More recently, Hess has taken up a “retirement career” as loan officer for the Farm Service Agency (FSA), mentoring young farmers, even as he and Elma help their middle son Jonathan and his wife, Monica, settle in to family traditions of precision. That’s already second nature to the young couple, with careers teaching high school agriculture and in nursing, respectively.

Feeding cattle

These days, the farm includes custom-feeding 300 cattle annually for producers from Vermont to South Carolina and as far

west as Ohio. Of course, this is a small feedlot by western standards, but that works in favor of the customer.

“We have a real advantage, being a smaller operation, because the person who talks to the owner [of the cattle] is also the person who feeds the cattle and walks the pens,” Hess says. “We don’t have a middle man.”

Of the cattle fed at Silver Run Farm and enrolled through the CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP), more than half qualify for

the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand — about three times the national average. That’s good, but Hess encourages customers to keep using carcass data to make their Angus cattle even better.

If Angus selection falters at the customer level, Hess has few options in the feedlot. “You can’t make poor genetics reach the CAB target, even if they are fed in an optimal environment,” he says.

The family raises their own feedstuffs for the cattle feedlot. That biochemistry background helps with the complexities of livestock feeding rations as well as nutrient management on the crops of corn and barley silage and grain. A commercial premix helps balance the rations.

Cattle get a ration that may be lower energy than that of some western yards, but Hess says it allows them to reach physiological maturity and realize more of their grade potential. Analyses of nutrient content of manure helps him guide details as minute as the mineral supplement balance.

Green feedyard

Operating under the watchful eye of the public, ecology is a key to continued longevity at Silver Run Farm. A concrete wall around the feedlot perimeter ensures proper control of manure and runoff, which is stored for mixing or spread directly on the farm’s cropland — all according to soil test and nutrient analysis.

The huge old barn, as well as the other



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livestock buildings, can generate a great deal of runoff from the average year’s 40 inches of precipitation. But half of the feedlot is under the cantilevered barn, where feedbunks are protected from weather-related waste. Cattle, too, find shelter and a dry place to lie.

Guttering on all the barns directs rainwater to cisterns. The farm still utilizes an 1837 hand-dug well as the main source of water for all livestock. They can drink up to 5,000 gallons (gal.) per day, Hess says, so the rooftops supplement the supply through underground cisterns that hold up to 28,000 gal. Altogether, some 560,000 gal. of water are collected each year for livestock and irrigation uses, with literally no effect on groundwater.

“Living at the urban-rural interface encourages reaching out to our non-farm neighbors,” Hess says. “When we can show them that our expansion resulted in less groundwater impact than before, it goes a long way toward promoting a positive image for livestock production.”

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SILVER RUN FARM