



2012 CERTIFIED ANGUS BEEF

Progressive Partner of the Year

Must. Have. Data.

CAB Progressive Partner and customers are hooked on herd improvement.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC



Coffee is to the caffeine hound as carcass data is to the customers of Chappell Feedlot. Once they've had a taste, it's hard for them to function without it.

"There isn't a good cow person out there who isn't damn proud of his cattle," says Tom Williams, owner-manager of the 7,500-head western Nebraska feedlot.

He makes sure they have a reason to be — through coordinated management from ranch to feedlot and then additional services, like ultrasound and extensive sorting. At the

end of the feeding period, Williams delivers the proof.

"We get individual data on virtually everything," he says.

From June 2011 through May 2012, the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed yard collected data on more than 9,300 head. Some loads show as much as 18% Prime. The overall snapshot reveals 44% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand and CAB Prime, nearly double the national average.

Five years ago the snapshot revealed 26.8%

CAB and Prime, which was great — then.

That quest for constant improvement and the eagerness to find new tools to help new customers along the way earned Chappell Feedlot the 2012 Progressive Partner of the Year Award.

Williams was planning to accept the honor, given to just one of the 69 CAB partner feedlots in 16 states, at the brand's annual conference, Sept. 19-21 in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va.

► **Above:** "We've been almost 100% grid-marketed for 15 years," says Tom Williams, owner-manager of the 7,500-head Chappell Feedlot.

Using the data

Two decades ago, Williams and his wife, Cindy, found a set of business partners and purchased the feedyard that lies 10 miles north of the Colorado line along Interstate 80. A handful of additions have come, 1,000 head at a time, but the biggest transformation has nothing to do with the physical structure. Rather, it has to do with the makeup of customers and their cattle.

“The day we took over, we had 699 calves from three investors and 2,500 square feet of bunk space,” Williams recalls.

Today, nearly all of the cattle enter the yard on retained ownership arrangements.

“We have turned 180 degrees, and that was my intention to begin with. It just took a while to do it,” he says.

Cattle now come from ranchers in 14 states, and many cite information flow as a big draw. If his customers are hooked on the data, that makes Williams the enabler.

“It’s to the point where if they don’t have it right away, they’re calling for it,” he says. That is evidence that they value the records.

Noting all the competing demands for a producer’s time, Williams says, “It’s tough to get through those first numbers. But after a year or two, most of our clients really use it.”

The feedyard works with CAB’s Paul Dykstra, beef cattle specialist, to pool reports and provide across-feedyard benchmarks.

“When you sell two or three or four times, it’s hard for me to sort all that data out,” says customer Eric Jennings, Spearfish, S.D. “They



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consolidate it for me and compare it to other pens of similar cattle. It helps to know where you need to go and what you need to be working on.”

The carcass and performance measures aren’t just interesting side notes. They’re main points of prominence to a rancher’s bottom line.

“We’ve been almost 100% grid-marketed

for 15 years,” Williams says. That attracts customers with cattle that fit that model.

“That was the only way we could get paid for the genetics we were using,” Jennings says. “Going through the ring, we were just selling them based on an average calf, and I felt we probably had above-average ones.”

Simply retaining ownership of cattle through the feedyard isn’t enough.

“I was looking for feedlots that utilized the grid and had some success with it,” he says.

“That marketing ends up being a pretty big deal, because the difference between profit and loss is how you market them.”

Williams knows that. They were among the first feedlots to ultrasound-sort cattle into marketing groups at processing, a practice they’ve honed and adjusted with the times.

Packer formulas have changed significantly since their inception, so Williams makes tweaks accordingly. For example, a Yield Grade 4 (YG 4) discount used to run \$20; today it’s \$5 to \$7 on those same grids. Heavyweights now cost a third of the discount they once did.

“That’s telling us to make them bigger,” Williams says. “They need the Choice meat.”

With high corn prices, it doesn’t mean more pounds at the expense of everything else. They still have to be efficient, and that amplifies the need to use technology to help sort, he says.



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“We’re just changing the way we scan. If we know the history, we look at the data. We’ll review it and decide if we should make them bigger or go quicker,” Williams says.

Cattle with marbling potential give him that flexibility.

“I don’t have any customer that’s just sitting flat, getting nothing done or going backwards, because they’re using their data,” he says.

Working closely and taking a personal interest in the herds helps keep pens full, even when supplies are tight.

“It’s easy for me to talk with ranchers,” says Williams, who spent 10 years as the foreman on a neighboring ranch prior to buying the feedlot. “It’s fun, because I like cows, and this way I get to work with a lot of different cow herds to some extent.”

Jennings switched to Chappell for their problem-solving approach. He was experiencing 6%-8% death loss from brisket disease, caused by high pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP), at the same time Williams was working with Colorado State University (CSU) to research the problem.

“We were able to identify which bloodlines we were having trouble with, and now we’re not having any problems,” he says.

Big picture in mind

Undergraduate work at Oklahoma State University coupled with master’s studies at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln sparked Williams’ interest in research. Experience with the university beef herd and a swine-testing job right after college helped cement his data-focused tendencies.

Williams likes details and besting past history. “If I can get another two-tenths of a pound of gain and keep everything else the same . . . let’s get it.”

That drive keeps him looking for the next advancement.

As CAB and the American Angus Association rolled out GeneMax™, a commercial DNA test for use on both feedlot cattle and replacement heifers (see

“By the Numbers,” page 176), Williams was one of the early cooperators. He allowed the company to pull blood samples on more than 700 head of cattle and coordinated



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gathering historical information on customers’ herds.

“Tom wants to be helpful to the progress of new technologies and learning in the area of making beef cattle better,” Dykstra says. “He sees the big picture and, in this case, was willing to go along with it when there was no personal or business benefit promised to him or his company.”

Sometimes it’s not about the next big thing, rather it’s about reinventing the

standard. Any feeder will say weaning calves is hard work, but moving the production calendar up a few months punctuates that statement.

Still Chappell welcomes early-weaned calves.

“With our own cows, I liked it because of our winter resources; it helped out our cow herd,” Williams says, noting that drought almost always brings an influx of younger calves.

Regardless of the year’s weather pattern, they’re set to deal with it.

“We will put boards in the bunk,” he says. That helps these highly efficient calves reach the feed easier, and it reduces waste. “Sometimes we’ll cross-fence our pens, too.”

Low-stress handling is routine at Chappell, but young calves emphasize the importance.

“You can really make an impression on them compared to the older ones — nobody’s messed them up yet,” Williams says. “But it’s also pretty important to settle them because they’re climbing the fence. They’re lost.”

Williams says he’s been fortunate to find employees who share that animal husbandry mind-set.

“It’s all about understanding cattle, and they either learn that or they’re gone,” he says. “They have to be detail-oriented to work here.”

“Not everybody likes to sort big, fat cattle,” he notes, but there’s a tradeoff: having fewer pulls. “Pen riding here is maybe a little easier because it’s not so emotionally draining. We don’t have a lot of death loss, partially because we coordinated health and mineral programs with each customer.”

They continue to align more closely with backgrounders, and recently leased a 6,000-acre ranch to send cattle out on grass, helping stabilize numbers into the yard. It also gives them more control on cattle history.

“I’m probably working more hours now than I did when we bought the yard,” Williams says.

Bring on the coffee — and the data, of course.



Editor’s Note: Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

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