

Diversified, Yet Focused

Nebraskans use feedback to improve cow herd amid competing demands.



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

Cattlemen Bart Beattie and Dave Schledewitz don’t take many trips through the pasture together.

With farming and swine-finishing enterprises in addition to his family’s 450-head cow herd, Beattie has plenty of different directions to go as he leaves the office each morning. That’s how Schledewitz earned the title of cow herd manager six years ago — he had the interest and ability to focus on the cows.

However, on this day they share a pickup cab and observe how good the grass looks on the rolling hills after a rain. They talk about specific cows and upcoming plans.

Adding value

“Everything’s on rotational grazing,” Schledewitz says, pointing out the cross fences. “We try to get the cows through [each pasture] once early, for five to seven days, to eat the grass. Then they come back later on for a longer stay.”

Working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) a number of years ago, they split up pastures and put in more water.

“It’s made a huge difference,” Beattie says. Aerial maps showing their pastures compared to others is proof enough for him.

Schledewitz implements the rotational plan that will garner unsolicited advice from

fellow producers. “I’ll get, ‘Why didn’t you stay in there longer? There’s tons of grass left.’” Yet he sticks to the protocols in order to leave enough foliage to catch snow and runoff, and build the resource.

“The cows aren’t coming out skinny; they look good,” he says.

It also keeps landlords happy, Beattie says.

“They appreciate it because they see we’ve got the grass in better shape than when we took it over,” he says. “My philosophy has always been that you leave a little more and then you’ll have a little more for next year, and you’ll pay yourself back in a heavier-weight calf, better condition on your cows, and they’re going to breed back better.

“It’s hard to put a pencil on that,” Beattie says.

Finding ways to add value

The producer earned an animal science degree from the University of Nebraska, and worked as a nutritional consultant for a few years before returning to the farm. At that time, “value added” was the new buzzword.

“The cattle deal was commodity-based,” Beattie says. “You just bought bulls for the average price, and you didn’t really worry

about pulling the bulls. You marketed the calves by pulling them off the cow and sending them to the sale barn.”

“I started looking at how can we add more value?” he says.

First he preconditioned calves, before trying source-and-age verification.

He still wondered if there was more to know and improve with the Angus-based cow herd.

“Sometimes we’d go to the sale barn, and sometimes we’d go to a local feedlot with



► **Right:** Cattlemen Bart Beattie (right) and Dave Schledewitz don’t take many trips through the pasture together, but they have a shared focus.

► At first, bawling calves were weaned in the feedyard. Today they're creep-fed, weaned and backgrounded at home before they arrive.



them,” Beattie says of his calf crop. “I was just wanting to get information back on our performance and our cattle without having to feed them ourselves and take the risk.”

About the time he was wondering, his wife Shana, working in animal pharmaceutical sales, stopped at nearby Will Feed Inc., a 3,000-head feedyard outside of Cozad, Neb. She and manager Anne Burkholder “hit it off” as they were both Florida natives now transplanted to central Nebraska. They forged a relationship, and Burkholder was looking to buy more cattle from local ranchers.



“Whether we’ve retained a percentage ownership or not, she’s always given us the information and feedback on the cattle,” Beattie says. “If we can market a higher percentage of our cattle through premium-Choice programs like [the] *Certified Angus Beef*® [(CAB®) brand], that’s been our goal.”

The most recent harvest groups include loads of up to 96% Choice and Prime, with 44% qualifying for the CAB brand.

“Bart is so easy to work with,” Burkholder says of everything from his well-kept records to implementing suggestions for improvements.

“He’s business-oriented, he’s efficient and he’s educated about the market, and knows how to run a breakeven,” she says. That makes pricing negotiations a quick phone call, Burkholder says, though they might take a few extra minutes to catch up on each other’s children. Both of their oldest, now 16-year-old daughters, were just toddlers when the feeding relationship started.

“I like to do business with people like me. They have family values; they’re good stewards; they care about what they’re doing,” Burkholder says.

At first, bawling calves were weaned in the feedyard. Today they’re creep-fed, weaned and backgrounded at home before they arrive.

“It makes a tremendous difference in health and performance and setting them up for success,” Burkholder says. “I ... hardly ever pull one of their calves.”

Improvement tweaks

Through the years the cattlemen have made other tweaks, like moving calving to late spring.

“It’s decreased our feed bill by a lot, and it’s also decreased calving issues,” Schledewitz says.

They’ve trended toward increasing Angus genetics in the herd.

“I found out they did better in the feedlot. They graded better,” Beattie says. The heifers are synchronized and artificially inseminated (AIed), and bulls are purchased from local breeders so the animals are adapted to their environment.

“We work with suppliers that put out good genetics that are going to last us a while,” he says. “It’s not like being in the Sandhills, but they do have to work.”


Schledewitz still remembers how nervous he was the first time Beattie gave him the checkbook and the authority to go to the bull sale solo, but now he routinely selects semen and synchronization strategies.

The two select heifers together.

“We’re a good combination because he knows the cows and remembers all the numbers,” Beattie says. “I always look for a moderate-frame heifer, and I throw out the extremes. Dave knows the genetics, so we’re a good team.”

That same approach gets them through calving season where they trade off on herd checks. They will gather some of the swine crew to help on processing or other big work days, but otherwise Beattie says they’re in capable hands.

“Dave makes the day-to-day decisions that have to be made without having to ask me everything,” Beattie says.

On this day the two talk about successes and the future. It’s clear that even on a farm where people are going in all different directions to get the work done, it’s possible to keep the cow herd moving on up. 

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