

Angus Equals Grid Success



An Iowa producer earns premiums by finishing his cattle.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

Amongst the rolling hills of southeastern Iowa, the town of Ottumwa cozies up to the banks of the Des Moines River. Some 25,000 people call it home, and Randy Conrad thinks that number is just about right.

The commercial cattleman and crop farmer has pastureland just a few miles outside of town. His dad, who farmed 30 miles to the north, purchased it in the 1970s as an investment property in case the Wapello County seat ever expanded.

Despite the faint hint of highway noise today, the gentle grassy slopes, interrupted only by a draw where a tree-lined creek flows, would make a pretty place for upscale homes. But for this producer, it's a darn good residence for his 500-head cow herd, too.

"I'd hate to see it turned into that anyway," says Conrad, who has lived within a few miles of the pasture ever since marrying a local farm girl 31 years ago. Two of the 13 Conrad siblings were already back on the farm when Randy and Melanie were looking for their own place to make a start.

"This place was available down here, so we moved into the house to take care of our

growing cow herd," he says. Now that's his main focus, save for a couple of weeks in the spring and fall when he's planting and harvesting his 300 acres of corn ground. In fact, even that toil is for the good of the bovines, since he feeds them his corn and silage in a small feedlot on the farm.

Although Conrad operates autonomously for the most part, the farm is a partnership with brothers John and Gary, who raise mostly row crops at the "home place" near Rose Hill, Iowa. They help out when the cattle work requires a few extra hands.

"We were raised on a dairy farm, but the barn burned down in '66," Conrad says. "So we always had cattle around; they just weren't always beef cattle."

Shifting to a beef herd

When he dove into the beef business full-time, "it was mixed genetics," he says. "The first year I probably calved 120 heifers bred to Limousin bulls, and I learned pretty quickly how to pull calves. Now we're a black-based herd, using Angus bulls."

During the first half of his career, cattle were sold off the cow in the fall, but in 1995 they bought another farmstead that also had feeding facilities. That's when the dedication to Angus began.

"They grade better," Conrad says. "We used to use black cows and Charolais bulls when we sold calves at weaning, but with Charolais I'd have very few Choice cattle."

Now those spring arrivals stay around

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until the following spring and summer. Conrad calves heifers in February, so they're done by the time the farm work demands more time. Cows start calving around April 1.

"I just have to check them during the day, and at night they do it on their own," he says, noting the natural calving ease of the Angus breed.

Right after the first cutting of hay, he'll early-wean calves off the heifers.

"That's when we heat synchronize and AI (artificially inseminate), and I think that helps them cycle," Conrad says. "It also gives them a little more chance to put some flesh back on."

Finishing the product

The rest of the calves are weaned on a complete, pelleted starter ration in late summer. These are relatively early-weaned, too, so they move onto a grower ration with homegrown haylage before stepping up to a finishing diet, with target harvest dates ranging from May to August.

"Since I started finishing cattle, I've pretty much always sold them on a grid," he says. His neighbor and bull supplier shared the success he'd had on the GeneNet grid. So when the cattle are nearing finish, Conrad calls Ken Conway, president of the marketing alliance.

"One thing I like about GeneNet is that you call and tell him when they're ready, and

if they're not, it's your own fault," he says. "Other packers used to look at them and say, 'oh, they need another 30 days,' but I had cattle out there that were ready to go."

He starts out by sharing freight with a neighbor, so he can send half loads of the cattle that finish earliest. Then he's selling about a load a week.

Conrad says grid marketing adds about \$40-\$50 in per-head premiums to his bottom

line. Last year more than 400 finished cattle graded 90% Choice or better, and 40% qualified for the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand.

"This way you get paid for exactly what your cattle will do rather than what the packer thinks they're going to do," he says.

That's a gamble he'll gladly take. Historically, it's worked out pretty well.



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