# Volunteering to Learn

## South Dakota cattleman earns CAB Progressive Partner Award.

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

It was just an offhand comment.

"We're always looking for producers that we can work with on trials."

George Perry was wrapping up a local South Dakota State University (SDSU) Extension meeting eight years ago, when he made that remark to a group of cattlemen. When a somewhat familiar face stood up among the crowd and volunteered, it was the beginning of a long-term educational partnership between the commercial-Angus producer and the reproductive physiologist.

**Progressive Partner Award**

John Moes of Florence, S.D., comes to every university or allied industry-sponsored meeting he can, so Perry recognized him as an eager learner and, likely, a progressive cattleman. Yet, he couldn't predict the impact Moes would have on future research projects and the university's ability to connect small-scale research trials to real-world application.

"He's willing to try things, and he's got the records to go with it," Perry says. "He can pull out his books and tell you what day an animal calved four years ago."

Moes can also list what pastures that cow has roamed, if she was bred by AI (artificial insemination) or natural service in the last decades, how many of her heifer calves were retained and how her steer calves did on the rail.

John and Donita Moes received the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand's 2014 Progressive Partner Award for their recordkeeping and intense focus on producing high-quality cattle.

A willing "guinea pig," Moes is likely the only commercial producer in the country to have every cow both ultrasound-scanned and DNA (Zoetis HD50K)-tested.

"We'll try something on campus with our 100 cows here, and it will work good," Perry says. "Then if it works in his position, where it's actually a producer the way he actually manages them — then that increases

►**Above:** John Moes and his wife, Donita, received the CAB® brand's 2014 Progressive Partner Award for their recordkeeping and intense focus on producing high-quality cattle. They've studied everything from synchronization strategies to prebreeding nutrition and their effects on conception.

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confidence dramatically on the ability to recommend it to other people."

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It's been a dramatic change from his beginnings on the farm to now helping lead the way in the beef business.

## Growing a farm

"We started from scratch, let me tell you," he says. There was one dairy farm and 10 other siblings, so after spending two of his married years "at home," Moes worked for an area grain and livestock producer. That was from 1980 until 1987, when he had a chance to buy a quarter section of ground.

A modest farmhouse came with the purchase: one room on the main floor, one room upstairs, and one closet for the entire family, which then included April (8), Amber (7) and 3-year-old Bryan.

The fertile, rolling pasture with marshy

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►John Moes has worked with SDSU's George Perry to study everything from synchronization strategies to prebreeding nutrition and their effects on conception in his cow herd.

►Research shows nutrition going into the breeding season affects reproduction, so Moes doesn't "get the heifers too fat" in the drylot. From SDSU work he's learned that once they're bred they should go to grass immediately, as opposed to waiting a week and risking embryonic loss.

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bottoms was the perfect place to start a herd.

"In 27 years we went from 20 cows to 250," he says today. Adding in the heifers, that herd approaches 300 females per year. It took 12 years of working in town, first full-time and then part-time, before Moes was able to turn all his daytime hours to the farm work in 1999.

Fifteen years later, just this year, he realized another dream. Bryan, married with two young children of his own, moved back after putting his college education to work for a few years with Bobcat Equipment in Arizona.

"I love my engineering, but I love my farming more," says the younger Moes, who attended SDSU with the intent of returning to the farm someday. "I knew I wanted to raise my children here."

Bryan remembers the old barns, the year they tore down that original house and made it into a windbreak, and processing cattle with nothing more than a headgate and some crudely nailed-together boards.

Later, a portable chute made working cattle "workable," but when Bryan spent a summer at the SDSU Opportunities Farm near Lennox, he took home more than a paycheck. He drew up plans for a monoslope barn and new facilities.

Today they have a 60 × 60-foot enclosure, complete with heated floors and a double alleyway that leads to a hydraulic Silencer chute. What used to take them all day now wraps up in a few hours, Bryan says.

There they not only process calves from their own herd, but also a couple thousand Holstein calves they grow and finish each year.

They completed the expansion in 2011 and are now permitted for 2,000 head, two-thirds of them in monoslope barns with a feeding curb. That space doubles as a calving area and a place to keep new mothers close during any bouts of cold, wet High Plains winter weather.

"You can now work cattle when it's 30 below," Moes says.

**John Moes knows that taking care of the land is part of taking care of the cows, and "if the cows are in good shape, the calves are in good shape."**

### Herd improvement

It's easy to see and quantify facilities improvements, but the herd has had a similar transformation.

"People with grain farms, we're micromanaging everything," he says. "So I'm micromanaging the cow herd. If you get 60% of them bred at Day 1, then you've got 60% of your herd that has 40 extra pounds of weight at weaning."

Using synchronization protocols and drawing on Perry's expertise, 90% of the herd is set to calve in the first 45 days.

Research shows nutrition going into the breeding season affects reproduction, so Moes doesn't "get the heifers too fat" in the drylot. From SDSU work he's learned that once they're bred they should go to grass immediately, as opposed to waiting a week and risking embryonic loss.

Improvements in fertility and conception rates have come in tandem with quality and performance.

"When I went to a lot of bull sales, I'd always pay a premium, and it didn't hurt us a bit," Moes says, but he's going to fewer sales these days. In 15 years of AI, he's gradually added more of the cow herd to the synchronization protocols. This spring Moes bred 290 heifers and cows in a couple two-day periods, including some custom-developed heifers. Around three-quarters of his herd is AI-bred.

He keeps back 50-60 heifers, which gives him the freedom to cull liberally and turn over genetics more quickly.

"They're almost easier to calve than the cows are," Moes says. "After you synchronize and work with them, they're tamer than the cows are."

As he was building the herd, purchased crossbred commercial females made up the base, but it's gradually turned straightbred Angus.

"I guess for the calving ease to start with. I could always find the bulls I wanted in Angus," he says, so committed to the breed now that it's hard to remember the alternative. "Right, wrong or otherwise, I started with growth bulls in the breed."

As luck would have it, Moes says, many of them were also "carcass bulls," though that wasn't really a criteria until they started feeding their own calves out in 2007.

Even though his feeder calves were topping the market, Moes wanted something more.

"We were trying to see if we were doing the right thing. It's a lot of fun to see how the cattle do," he says.

Moes put that carcass data right to work during selection.

"We're looking at marbling and uniformity now," he says. "You can sell calves

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The first 2014 load reached 64% CAB acceptance, compared to 27% two years ago.

Others tell him to put more weight on, but Moes likes to send out about 200 head of finished cattle in three drafts a few weeks apart and tries to hit the high in the marketing cycle.

"Your efficiencies aren't there later on either," Moes says.

That's not just a trait he values in the herd, but also in the land. Feedlot manure is managed in a holding pond and then spread on the pasture to improve production and to get the most out of each acre. Working with the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Department, Moes put an easement on 230 acres of his land, so that it will never be developed.

For these efforts, Moes was one of four finalists for the 2014 Leopold Conservation Award.

He knows that taking care of the land is part of taking care of the cows, and "if the cows are in good shape, the calves are in good shape."

Moes studies any changes carefully. He reads, he consults experts and then he acts. When something works for him, Moes is quick to spread the good news, too.

"There's very seldom we show up to try a new study that the entire large-animal class from Lake Area Tech School isn't out there. He invites them all," Perry says, referring to the college up the road at Watertown, S.D. "We're there doing research projects, and there are all these other people seeing a producer that's implementing them. That area around him is probably one of the quickest areas for adapting changes just because they see what he does and how it has benefited him."

More evidence of his support for higher education: The family recently donated $10,000 to help build the new SDSU Cow-Calf Research and Education Unit (see "SDSU to Provide Opportunities for Industry Advancement" on page 296).

Today, Perry proves many of his theories on the Moes herd, yet the producer still comes to every information meeting he can get to.

"I joke with him, 'You've seen most of this firsthand since we've done it on your place,' " Perry says. "He says, 'Yeah, but I still learn something every time I hear you talk about it.' "

The herd has improved, the grass is more productive, the facilities are nearly ideal — and it's all the result of an unwavering philosophy.

"You can't just work hard to make a living anymore," Moes recalls, telling his young son. "You also have to work smart."

Decades later and working side by side, the learning continues.

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