

# Here, There and Yon



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## Past CAB board chairman Kevin Yon on free producer advantages of Angus and its world-leading brand.

by **Steve Suther**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

**M**ost Angus cattle farmers and ranchers say they are great supporters of the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand. Not all of them realize it actually works the other way around, too. The brand supports Angus producers, and the more they realize that, the more it's true on a personal level.

Just ask Kevin Yon, a CAB supporter since he first heard about the brand as a youth working on his grandpa's farm — before he attended Clemson University; met his future bride, Lydia; and started a family and a foundation Angus herd.

The Yons were early participants in the South Carolina Quest and CAB Value Discovery Project in the 1990s.

"Did I understand everything about CAB then? No. Do I understand everything about it now? No, but I know it's the best, and we own it as Angus producers, all of us, seedstock and commercial across the country," says the

immediate past (2015) CAB board chairman from Ridge Spring, S.C. "It's our brand, and we have a vested interest in it."

### Chain-wide benefits

He's talking about the American Angus Association-owned brand created in 1978 to add value to Angus cattle through its specification-based premium branding program. Some producers directly add value by retaining an interest after weaning, selling finished cattle to CAB-licensed packers. Yon has fed with Hands Triangle H near Garden City, Kan., for many years.

Most Angus producers sell calves at weaning and, especially for those far removed from feedyards and packers, it's a challenge to keep the whole supply chain top of mind. They may not own calves in a feedyard, but everyone owns the continuing responsibility, Yon says.

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**— Kevin Yon**

"We all eat and have friends and neighbors who enjoy great beef, who pay good money to buy CAB, and they seem to understand it very clearly," he says. "They represent the pull of demand. They want what we produce and if they have the opportunity, they will buy *Certified Angus Beef*."

The brand adds value regardless of herd size, Yon says, noting those with smaller herds still see their calves outsell non-black calves.

"The next step is, they've got to be more than just black," he says. "Maybe even they've

► **Above:** "If the market says it's right and the consumer says it's right, who can argue?" says 2015 CAB Board Chairman Kevin Yon, shown here with his wife, Lydia.

got to be more than just Angus. They've got to be the right Angus that will produce steer carcasses to meet CAB standards that please consumers — along with daughters that go back into the herd and do everything that Angus always have. We can't ever forget we're dealing with a breed that can do both."

The Yons started their herd as part of Congaree Farms, which they managed for seven years before realizing their own dream as independent family farmers.

### Using the tools

It was the dawn of data-driven selection, "the beginning of an era where the tools began to surface," Yon says. "We went from who-won-what-show to looking at the *Sire Summary*, then ultrasound and real carcass data and now genomics."

Angus had the complete package early on.

"That's what attracted Lydia and I to Angus, just being part of something great," he says. "We've got the tools to identify the cattle that do it best. And just like CAB, the tools are there for the taking — they enable everyone with an entrepreneurial spirit — no one has to use them. No one has mandated that you've got to do this and you've got to do that, but it is sure rewarding to use what's there."

CAB is "one of the greater success stories in American business," Yon says. "For



► Kevin and his son, Corbin, stack hay.

anybody just starting out as we were, you had to love the opportunity." He recalls a seminar at CAB headquarters more than 20 years ago that helped explain how the brand worked.

"It was just one of those things that you felt, you know, we're a part of this," he says. "We can be a player. It doesn't matter if you have five cows or 500, you'd be part of it. It's yours."

Feelings aside, Yon says the brand is important to all producers because of the money.

"It's relevant because money talks," he says.

"Cattle that have a better chance of meeting CAB specifications bring more, even if you're selling feeder calves, based on the rewards after finishing. People understand dollars and cents pretty easily, and I think that has driven it. What could be any better incentive?"

Yon says the top tier of commercial producers use breeding prediction tools "as much as we do with seedstock," relying on the Angus database and CAB-backed market stability.

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“We have bull customers who use the tools so well they challenge us to get better,” he adds. “They’ve raised the bar high, and you know that competition is good for everybody. Others watch their cattle top the market, and learn from them — not just because of genetics, but they do so many things right.”

The commercial sector feels the same kind of ownership in CAB, Yon says. “It’s like the power of one, or Team Angus, or whatever you want to call it: They are Angus.”

Many years of cooperation with CAB led the Yons to many “Day-on-the-Ranch” visits from chefs, restaurateurs, distributors and retailers.

“That’s one of the finest things Lydia and I have been a part of, just seeing their excitement and loyalty to our brand and how they view us,” he says. “They’re so interested in what we do, so much yearning to know how it’s produced, to see, feel and smell, and just to know more — but really, how much they put Angus producers up on a pedestal.”

Looking back on a year as CAB board chairman, Yon says he was close enough to feel the drama behind what may have seemed a routine ninth consecutive record sales year.

“Any of us could be guilty of taking that for granted, but I saw how tough it was,” he says. “The first half of the year did not look good — it was like third quarter and down by 14, but just fighting and coming from behind to win the game.”

The past few years have been tough, getting more supply as the beef cow herd was declining.

“The demand was there, and somehow, some way, we supplied it,” Yon says. “To me that’s just amazing that we got that done as a breed, and as an organization. I hope we never become lackadaisical to the fact that, yeah we’re up again, because there may come a time when we won’t be up. But I think we can reach a billion pounds sold.”

Genetic progress and better tools to apply those resources help explain last year’s months above 30% CAB acceptance rates.

“We’re breeding for a target now,” Yon says. Not because of promotion or sophisticated marketing, but rather financial incentive.

“I learned a long time ago that you don’t change a grown person’s mind,” he notes. “You just show them the facts and let them make up their own minds that they want to do something. And that’s what they want to do. If the market says it’s right and the consumer says it’s right, who can argue?”

**AJ**

**Editor’s Note:** Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.