

Detail on a Large Scale



North Platte Feeders is the 2003 CAB Feedlot Partner of the Year for lots with 20,000-head capacity or more.

by *Steve Suther*

Good things can come in big packages. Whether feedlots or automobiles, there's a standard of excellence that only a precision-designed and -guided masterpiece can achieve. "North Platte Feeders [NPF] is the Cadillac of Nebraska feedyards," says Turk Stovall, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) assistant supply development director. "NPF exemplifies excellence on a large scale."

The 43,000-head feedlot was built south of North Platte, Neb., in 1989. President and general manager Jack McCaffery planned it based on decades of experience, sweat and even a few mistakes. Licensed since 2001, NPF was recently named the 2003 CAB Feedlot Partner of the Year among yards with 20,000-plus capacity.

PHOTOS BY ERIC GRANT

► Carcass data doesn't come as easy in the cash market, where Jack McCaffery makes his stand. "A lot of people connect the focus on beef quality with grid marketing," Turk Stovall notes. "North Platte proves high beef quality standards can fit well with a focus on live trade and cash marketing."

Big quality

Being big doesn't keep a feedlot from standing out for high-quality

beef any more than such a focus keeps it from operating in the cash cattle market. "We've always figured you have to feed high-quality cattle and be detailed in everything you do," McCaffery says. "We could expand another 15,000 or 20,000 head and still follow our program."

In the NPF program, though, some customers may feed 4,000 head, while others feed fewer than 100 head. "We feel everybody is equal," he says. "We have two pens that feed 200 head; the rest are all smaller."

McCaffery's Oregon roots include diversified farming, raising purebred Herefords and, inevitably, feeding cattle. After selling the farm in 1961, he worked in feedlot management in Colorado, Nebraska and Kansas. During those years, his son Dean became more interested in the feeding industry while gaining expertise in the earth-moving trade.

After 12 years at the helm of what was then a truly commodity-focused yard in Kansas, the McCafferys were ready to build and manage the best to feed the best. "I went to people who had been long-term customers and said, 'We're going up to Nebraska to build a feedlot. Do you want to be part of it?' Building this on a bare piece of ground in '89 was a great experience, a great feeling to be able to do it."

Dean's help was vital from the start, and he serves as assistant manager today. "He did all the surveying and layout and has always been in charge of all the dirt moving," says McCaffery, whose other son is a machinist in Kansas.

"We have always felt it's important to feed quality, and since starting this yard we have always been privileged to get to feed the better end of the cattle," McCaffery says. "We haven't been as intense with the data. Not until we became licensed with CAB."

Carcass data doesn't come as easy in the cash market, where McCaffery chooses to make his stand. "A lot of people connect the focus on beef quality with grid marketing," Stovall notes. "North Platte proves high beef quality standards can fit well with a focus on



► After 12 years at the helm of what was then a truly commodity-focused yard in Kansas, the McCafferys were ready to build and manage the best to feed the best.

live trade and cash marketing. NPF and CAB have been a good fit.”

With a proven record of producing high-quality cattle, six packers shop the North Platte pens each week. One week last summer saw cash marketings to five different companies, McCaffery says. “Every week we get the top of the market or a little better.”

Over the last few years, CAB premiums have become common in grid marketing. “We tried all the grids, but currently sell 95% cash,” he says. Of course, the cash market was the original value-based market. “We negotiate cash, and then we may get \$2 or \$3 per hundredweight on the ones that go CAB.”

Excellence from the start

The “Cadillac” yard had a reputation for excellence from the start. Barely a teenager now, NPF still wows prospective customers. “Have you ever been there?” That’s the first comment you’ll hear if you talk to those who have. “It’s a feedlot that makes you feel good about the industry,” says longtime customer Shirley Bickel. She helps her husband, Bill, run 600 cows near Ismay, Mont.

Dan Marrs, Whitewood, S.D., echoes the amazement at how neat the feedlot seems. “You can’t even find a pipe out of place there.” But as notable as McCaffery’s experience, steam-flake mill and state-of-the-art facility may be, results and service are what customers remember when they get past first impressions.

The Bickels had been feeding their calves on the ranch since the 1970s, when they began converting an 1890s Hereford tradition to Angus. Shortly after NPF was built, “we went down and looked at it, talked to Jack and sent a load,” Bill says. “They did so well we began sending everything there. They do an excellent job. Last year we sent them light cattle a month after weaning — they still averaged 4 pounds a day, even in the heat, and we’ve had under 5.2 feed conversion.”

A couple of years after the Montana ranchers started, Marrs met NPF procurement manager Roger Herman at the Black Hills Stock Show & Rodeo in Rapid City, S.D. “He convinced us to try it, and now we feed all 400 head there,” Marrs says.



► The 43,000-head feedlot was built south of North Platte, Neb., in 1989. With the help of his son, Dean (right), Jack McCaffery planned it based on decades of experience, sweat and even a few mistakes.

Like the Bickels, Marrs began changing a Hereford herd to straight Angus in the 1970s. And like his neighbors to the west, he has no plans to crossbreed now.

“They’re doing what we want. We may not have the top-gaining set of cattle at North Platte, but we’ll be within the top 10 pens,” he says. Grade has been from low to upper 90% Choice and higher, with CAB acceptance about 50%, not including the Primes.” The Marrs cattle come in as backgrounded 800-weights and usually “beat 4 pounds by quite a bit. One year we almost broke the rule-of-five barrier,” he says. “A pen of steers gained 5.15 pounds [per day] and converted at 5.05. That kind of performance keeps us happy.”

Information feedback

Since becoming CAB-licensed, NPF has stood out for dedication to enrolling high-quality cattle and getting data back to the ranchers, Stovall says. “Jack has taken the reins and incorporated the CAB information and reporting system into the way NPF does business.”

In their first full award year, the yard enrolled 6,742 head; in the 2002-2003 award year, June to June, they enrolled more than 15,000 head and harvested 9,371. The 1,271 head accepted as CAB also ranked NPF as

fourth in overall volume for the year.

“We have CAB send data out to them the same day they send to us, so we know we each have a copy,” McCaffery says. “Then we can call and go over it, try to answer their questions.” The data is a culmination in a steady stream of communication. “Whenever a set of cattle comes in, we call and tell producers the off-truck weights,” he says.

“Whenever a pen goes on the show list we take their picture and send that out to the people along with their closeouts. When we ship,” he says, “we call that morning, before we know how they did and give them the pay weights. None of us can spend enough time on customer relations, but we keep trying.”

The Bickels appreciate it, and they use data to guide selection. “We are buying carcass bulls now,”

Bill says. “The money’s still in conversion and ‘doability,’ and we don’t want to lose that, so it’s a balancing act. But the Angus genetic pool is wonderful. You can do what you want.”

McCaffery enrolls all Angus producer-source cattle in CAB. “This was built as a 100% custom yard,” he says. “But with CAB and other changes in the industry, we are getting into some ownership when it serves customer needs.” Enrolling may be a customer service or an internal tool. “If we buy a set we can keep track of them and see if we want to do that again.”

For prospective customers, McCaffery says, “I don’t mind trying to get the carcass data for them, enrolling them with CAB, [even without retained ownership] as long as they pay data collection charges.”

McCaffery says being a licensed partner has been a doorway for getting into some “percentage deals,” and buying some high-quality Angus for feeding customers. But he can’t go for every deal. “Some ranchers have a natural inclination that feedlots should take all the risk, or that we’re made of money,” he says with a smile. “We’re looking for the true partners.”

