

# Making It Look Easy

CAB Nebraska panhandle partner honored for quality focus.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

**F**ifteen miles from Wyoming and halfway between Colorado and South Dakota, you'll find an increasingly diversified, yet quality-focused feedlot. Hergert Feeding Co. (HFC), Mitchell, Neb., has been a standout as a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) licensee for nearly six years.

Now HFC has won the first-ever Quality Focus Award for feedlots with less than a 15,000-head capacity. The new annual award honors feedlots that post the highest CAB acceptance for the year.

"It takes a combination of high-quality cattle and targeted marketing to maintain that throughout a year," says Paul Dykstra, CAB feedlot specialist.

No other CAB feedlot partner — of any size — has surpassed HFC for total number of enrolled cattle that have hit the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)-brand target. Even with an annual CAB-acceptance

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The CAB "30.06" program promotes on-target feeding by noting cattle that achieve at least 30% CAB or Prime quality with no more than 3% Yield Grade (YG) 4s or 3% overweight carcasses. Honored levels are Bronze, with 500 head cumulative; Silver, with 1,000 head; and Gold, with 2,000 on-

target cattle. One of only two CAB feedlots with the Silver award, HFC had accumulated 1,736 head that hit the brand's target as of this summer.

However, the Quality Focus Award is more than a 30.06 level, Dykstra says. "It's a good indicator that a feedlot is tuned into the carcass-value benefits of managing for high quality. It's also encouraging to our staff, because it shows what's possible in the feedlot sector. The award winners aren't tapping into some secret source of elite cattle," he says. "Other feedlots can win for their customers by focusing on the quality end of the market, without sacrificing feed conversion or gain."

## The right way

HFC has been a model CAB partner, Dykstra says. "Tim takes a lot of pride in doing a job the right way, and he is very good at sorting cattle. His skills allow HFC and its customers to pick up steady grid premiums by sorting pens down to half loads or some



other workable size. Not every load will hit a home run, but making small premiums over the cash market on a volume of cattle throughout the year translates into real dollars.”

Customer Arlan Marx, Rushville, Neb., owned 110 of those 30.06 cattle at HFC, and was pleased to see a grid premium on his first set of steers this year. A feeder for nearly 40 years, he still figures everything back to a cash equivalent, but says the steers sold in April made more than \$99 on a \$95 market. They had a 38% CAB-acceptance rate.

Marx started feeding at the ranch in 1967, after watching neighbors’ calves sell for 25% more than his calves. “I knew they were just as good,” says the commercial Angus producer, who also has 15 years experience sorting calves at auction markets. “The next year when we hauled finished cattle to Omaha, two of the four loads topped the market there.”

He’s fed ever since, in custom yards since the 1980s drought, and for the last four years at HFC. Marx has known Brost since the latter was a herdsman with Windy Acres Angus at Harrison, Neb. Brost left there in 1995 to join HFC and worked his way up to feedlot manager this spring. That’s when previous HFC manager Wayne Smith took over management of a ranch in Colorado.

Other duties were divided for the near term among Brost, owner Dave Hergert, office manager Judy Spreier and maintenance manager Rick Olson. Brost has always been in charge of sorting to outcome and feedlot cattle health, two of the keys to hitting the quality target. He maintains those responsibilities, in addition to a little more paperwork, which, he notes, “isn’t my favorite thing.” Still, he knows it is necessary.

Past records help when repeat customer cattle come in, especially those that walk the line between excellent potential quality grade and the risk of overfeeding.

“We know some of the sires on some of the ranches that we have to watch for yield grade problems,” Brost says. It’s a challenge to recognize their ideal end point from year to year, but he’s up for it. “If it was easy, everybody would do it,” he says with a grin.

### A better beef

HFC started in the 1990s with a capacity of 3,800 head, but it has expanded to 10,000

head. That’s cattle capacity. Last summer, the yard began to build sheep pens, and currently keeps 8,000 head on hand, halfway to the planned 16,000-head capacity. It’s part of a diversification strategy, Brost explains. HFC also began feeding more 180-pound (lb.) Holstein calves last year to limit the risk of buying other, less predictable types of unknown cattle.

In addition, Hergert has 2,650 Angus-based cows in Nebraska and Wyoming, with most of their progeny being fed at HFC. Brost is in charge of the 650 cows that graze the irrigated circles and dryland ranges around the feedlot, and he enjoys that connection to his youth growing up on a Niobrara River commercial Angus ranch.

Brost appreciates the growing link between his job as feedlot manager and scores of Angus cow-calf producers, and says retained ownership customers will remain a top priority.

“The feedlot business is getting closer to the ranch all the time, especially in our work with CAB,” he says. Ranchers often test the waters with a single load, and that’s what Brost suggests. “We got a \$26-per-head premium off the first sort in that pen,” he says, passing by where 18 steers remain for a final group.

“Our willingness to handle smaller numbers in pens lets us provide individual cattle management for all of our clients,” Brost says. “That helps them achieve their goals of raising the best cattle, profitably.”

Those efforts can be in vain if producers “wean on the truck” to the feedlot. The problem was worse 10 years ago, but still exists, Brost says. “If you are retaining ownership it is a lot better to get the bawl out of them before they come here, because any lot is a breeding ground for disease.”

Marx sends HFC the ideal kind of cattle — preconditioned with vaccines against respiratory disease before weaning, then backgrounded on corn silage and 5 lb. of grain daily till early January. They get booster shots at the feedlot shortly after arrival, weighing about 850 lb., and continue the low-stress route to a quality finish.



► Brost plans to improve upon Hergert Feeding Co.’s CAB-acceptance rate of 30.2%, plus 2.9% USDA Prime.

While Marx thinks in terms of the cash-live equivalent, he knows his cattle bring more on the grid. Brost says, “Probably 90% of the fat cattle we sort and sell on the grid, because that’s how we get the most money. We get paid for what we have rather than average, but what we have can still surprise me a little. I have learned a lot, and I keep learning.”

He invites cow-calf producers to come to class. “We don’t necessarily have to feed all of your cattle, but if you are a progressive rancher with known genetics, you would be ahead to let us try it with your big end, little end or middle cut,” Brost says.

Hergert negotiates all types of partnering and information feedback deals, Brost adds. “A guy in Montana had retained ownership for years, but last fall he had Dave buy them, but part of the deal was he got to see all the data.” The range of shared ownership is variable from 10% to the most common 50%.

As the cattle cycle turns, information will be more valuable, Brost says. “The good cattle will keep bringing more money than the common kind. The grid-type cattle — when you have the data to show how they did on the grid before — those will be worth more,” he says. “The good cow-calf producers will keep buying better bulls and paying more attention to the numbers. They’ll build value into their herds, and that will build a better end product in the beef.”