

A Natural Balance

Iowa producer displays lifelong focus on quality, environment.

by *Miranda Reiman*

Dave Petty asks himself three questions before making a decision on his Eldora, Iowa, farm: “Will the outcome be profitable? Will it make the business more productive and efficient? Will it help the environment?”

“If you cover those three bases, then it’s usually a pretty good decision,” he says. “Even if it’s not the perfect decision, it’s one that will add to your operation and not take away from it.”

Petty and his wife, Diane, own and operate the diversified Iowa River Ranch, which is about half cropland, half pasture and hay land. All production supports the Angus-based cow herd and the feedlot where he finishes his calves.

“Cattle and conservation go hand in hand,” Petty says. “Without the cattle to utilize the grass, we’d be like so many other people, farming every inch of it.” He bales waterways and grass buffers that replace the traditional end rows.

“Instead of trying to squeeze them down to narrow strips, we make them wide enough to bale,” Petty says. “If we did not have the ability to use the hay, we’d probably eliminate that, which would get back to farming some of the sensitive areas.”

He has added to the herd, increasing grass needs throughout the years.

“Having some of the rolling hills seeded down to good, productive forage slows and stops erosion,” says Petty, whose land lies along the Iowa River.

In times of higher corn prices, many farmers would put this higher-risk land back into crop production, but Petty has continued to seed down tilled ground for the past 20 years.

“The only way I can afford to do that is by having a very efficient cow herd,” he says. “The average run-of-the-mill set of cows wouldn’t cut it. The conception rates would be lower, their rebreeding lower, and we wouldn’t be rewarded with premiums for their product.”

Cow herd rewards

Petty has been selling cattle on a quality-based grid for more than eight years.

“I’m able to do the same amount of work as the other fellows, but I’m getting a



PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

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premium for the product I raise,” he says.

He has improved the herd to continually hit the mid-90s for percent Choice and upwards of 40% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance, thanks partly to individual carcass data.

“It allows you to really analyze your production and make some adjustments as you go,” Petty says. “Over the years that’s what takes place. It’s not any big changes but small changes that all add up.”

They add up to better females, for one thing.

“The real key is understanding what you need for a cow herd,” Petty says. “In today’s world, there are so many herds that are mixed up. Even though they are using the best bull, they’re using him on a messed up cow herd.”

Petty has maintained a consistent genetic base and does not embrace the idea that it’s better to purchase heifers than to raise them.

“You can buy a cheaper cow than you can raise a good cow, but the question is can you buy a good female?” Petty asks. “It depends on what you’re buying. There’s a difference between buying a Cadillac or a Volkswagen. You can always buy a Volkswagen cheaper, but what have you got?”

“If you go out and buy good, consistent

genetics, proven females, they’re not going to be cheap either,” he says.

His career as a cattleman started by grazing cows on rented pastures, but he’s stayed true to his initial theory that good cows make all the difference.

“My cow herd is not a mixed-up conglomeration of colors and genetics,” Petty says, careful to point out that he steered clear of the “exotic craze.”

“It’s a solid, consistent set of Angus-based cows. If you can put a solid bull on that, you’ve doubled your odds of getting what you need to be producing,” he says.

Petty, who spent time on the livestock evaluation team at Hawkeye Community College and attended Iowa State University, has studied what makes a good carcass. His daughter, Dresden, following her father’s lead, graduated from Iowa State last year and competed on the school’s meat animal evaluation team.

“You have to have natural fleshing ability, which is not directly correlated to intramuscular fat distribution, but it goes pretty closely hand in hand,” he says. “A thick, deep-bodied animal will typically end up with a pretty good carcass.”

They have to start out right, though.

“I’ve always felt you can’t build anything on a poor foundation,” Petty says. “They’ve got to be structurally correct. That’s a major

factor in longevity, and longevity is a key factor in profitability.”

Start to finish

Petty sees his cattle from conception through finishing at his on-farm feedlot.

“Feeding your own cattle and being around them, you get used to when they should be ready,” he says. “Selling into a grid, you have to be ready, but you don’t want to be over-ready either.”

Providing home-raised grain and forage has helped maintain a focus on feed efficiency.

“It was a good reason for me to stay away from cows that were too big and inefficient,” he says. “I couldn’t afford the feed.”

Petty knows every change he makes will create a lasting impression.

“You don’t really have a lot of time to waste. We only have the opportunity to turn

our cow herd over seven times in a lifetime,” he says. Years pass between a genetic adjustment and getting the results, so Petty opts for a continual journey in the same direction. “I actually won’t be turning my cow herd over,” he says. “I’ll just be extending the same philosophy.”

Knowing nature’s timetable is also a big part of Petty’s decision-making process.

“With a lot of environmental efforts, results take a long time to see, but the benefits are great,” he says. “They just don’t show up overnight.”

He recently drilled wells and added a piping system to spread water around to all sections of the rotational grazing system.

“They’re better able to utilize all the pasture instead of letting some of it go to waste and overeating the rest,” Petty says. “That’s a real long-term improvement, but

the benefits are showing up more each year.”

Although the family won the top 2001 Environmental Stewardship Award from the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) for their efforts, it’s clear they don’t do it for recognition.

“If it’s environmentally friendly and it adds to our productivity, then it’s a good thing,” Petty says. He’s been sharing this mind-set with those who work for him, too.

“We have some really good help. It takes people who understand the philosophies of what you’re trying to do,” he says. “In agriculture that’s one of our challenges, bringing along the employees and helping them to be a part of the operation.”

Fringe benefits include knowing they are producing some of the world’s highest quality beef while enhancing the natural beauty of the land for generations to come. 