



Ben Brancel, Wisconsin's secretary of agriculture, uses his farm to try out programs his department offers to the public. He was one of the first to start whole-herd testing for Johne's disease after his department began a Johne's testing program.



A Rancher in the Capitol

STORY & PHOTOS BY JENNIFER RYAN

Wisconsin's Secretary of Agriculture Ben Brancel took the diligence learned from his farm background to the state capitol.

Each cow in Ben Brancel's pasture has a story — including Muttles, the Holstein-Angus cross.

A Holstein?

Brancel, Wisconsin's secretary of agriculture, trade and consumer protection, was raised on the farm he now owns and operates near Endeavor, Wis. In 1995 he sold the Holstein dairy, started in 1865 by his great-great-grandfather, to raise Angus cattle — a decision greatly influenced by his increasing involvement in government.

Today, the only remaining traces of the dairy are a former all-American 2-year-old that Brancel's son, Tod, kept to show, Muttles and a drawing of a Holstein cow on the "Brancel Farms" sign near the driveway.

"I milked cows for many, many, many years," Brancel says. "I sold the Holsteins

because I was becoming more involved in the legislature. At the time I was chair of the finance committee. It wasn't going to work if I continued in the legislature. So we dispersed the dairy and started looking at different breeds.

"I looked at Gelbvieh, Polled Herefords, and then I was introduced to Brian McCulloh. I really liked how he promoted his cattle and thought he presented them and the breed well."

Brian McCulloh of Woodhill Farms Inc., Viroqua, Wis., sold Brancel seven bred females to begin his Angus herd. Since the sale, McCulloh says the two have formed a friendship and talk often about the cattle industry.

"I think Ben's background in Holstein cattle allowed him to see that Angus would be to the beef cattle industry what the Holstein breed was to the dairy industry. Like a lot of people in the public eye, he needs a release. Milking cows can be less of a release than watching a bunch of black cattle graze on the pasture."

McCulloh says he sees Brancel as a unique political figure who doesn't do "business as usual."

"He seeks advice and surrounds himself with good, solid people with their heads and their hearts in the right place," McCulloh says.

■ Breeding for the future

When beginning his Angus herd, Brancel chose to develop his herd for quality carcass genetics, using artificial insemination (AI) to breed for marbling, large ribeyes and little excess fat. His farm's slogan, "Breeding for the Future," reiterates the goal.

"I try to AI the cow herd by watching what other producers are doing and trying to figure out why. I believe in long-run carcass genetics. We're making great strides in figuring out what causes tenderness and flavor. We expect marbling to play a major role in that, but that's not the last thing we're going to learn," Brancel says.

"With Angus, rather than Holsteins, there is more of a connection between the producers and the purebred breeder," he says. "Holstein promotes to other registered breeders. The showring is different from what commercial producers want. With Angus, purebred breeders recognize their role in the commercial industry."

"It's challenging to keep up on trends," Brancel says. "You have to decide which direction you want to go and know which bulls are out there to fulfill those needs. I'm still trying to figure out maternal traits. I've had some [females] that were

supposed to be good milkers turn out to be below average and some that weren't that turned out to be good milkers."

Brancel says cattle size is a trend in which he sees continuous development.

"I think the Angus breed is struggling with size right now — how big or how little we want the breed to be," he says. Breeders want growthy but efficient cows.

"The Angus breed recognizes that it has to have some substance," Brancel says.

"They have to get as much meat as possible from that one market animal without losing efficiency."

To help keep up with the industry, Brancel uses skills he learned in the legislature to relate with other breeders. Tom Tomaw, president of the Wisconsin Angus Association, says Brancel also helps other breeders keep up with state issues.

"He's been very informative with programs the Department of Ag is putting on," Tomaw says. "He's kept us updated as new programs become available and about new health rules. He's real easy to talk to and ask questions to. He's not someone you're afraid to walk up and start talking to."

■ Leading by example

Brancel uses his farm to try out programs his department offers to the public. He was one of the first to start a whole-herd testing program for Johne's disease after his department began its disease test.

"We've started a Johne's disease test program on how to manage and deal with it. I visit regularly with the local vet about vaccination and prevention. I want to



Legislative time restraints prompted Ben Brancel to switch from a dairy herd to Angus.

provide a healthy calf or cow to the marketplace," he says.

The environment is another hot topic. "Point-source (pollution) comes out of smoke stacks or pipes. It's very easy to see and to regulate. Nonpoint pollution comes from runoff of lawns, fields, roads and ditches. ... It's hard to quantify," Brancel says. "It's going to take a lot of management techniques working together to solve this problem."

To control nonpoint-source (NPS) pollution on his farm, Brancel uses several management techniques.

"I'm conscientious about how I spread manure and where. We use technology to help us maintain our fields and prevent pollution. We have fenced cows out of the creek that runs through the middle of our property. We have gone to a minimal-till cropping system. We also soil test every field regularly. And we apply manure only to the fields that call for needed nutrients."

Brancel also views food safety and biosecurity as challenges for producers in Wisconsin and the nation.

"Food safety is a big issue to the public. The public doesn't want to deal with any stomachaches when they go out to enjoy a meal. The public will not tolerate as much as they used to, and it's a big challenge," he says.

"Biosecurity is another big issue for us. More international movement of livestock and genetic engineering require us to be ever-vigilant in maintaining the highest standards of quality."

Brancel's job, at work and at home, is dealing with these issues. From administration to administering vaccines, his lifestyle is agriculture.

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