

Nebraska technology master wins 2008 CAB Quality Assurance award.

Story & photos by **Lindsay Domer**

The 2008 Quality Assurance Manager of the Year winner didn't see it coming. Mike Beller doesn't miss a keystroke of customer data at Beller Feedlot, Lindsay, Neb. But when he learned Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) had honored him for such detail, he feigned shock.

"How did that happen?" Beller slowly breaks into a smile and starts to explain his surprise at winning any award in the beef industry.

Rather than a cowboy hat, boots or a plate belt buckle, Beller sports a baseball cap and tennis shoes. Instead of a dually pickup, he drives a purple sedan.

In college, Beller didn't major in ranch management or animal science, but in the electronics field that fits his current work toward a master's degree in software engineering.

"I'm not a cowboy," he says with a wider smile. "I don't fit the mold of a typical cattleman. My value comes from my technological knowledge."

A standout

Paul Dykstra, CAB beef cattle specialist, says, "They may have broken the mold after Mike, but his talents fit the beef producer's ever-increasing need for information management and technology. He stands out as one of the best in the industry."

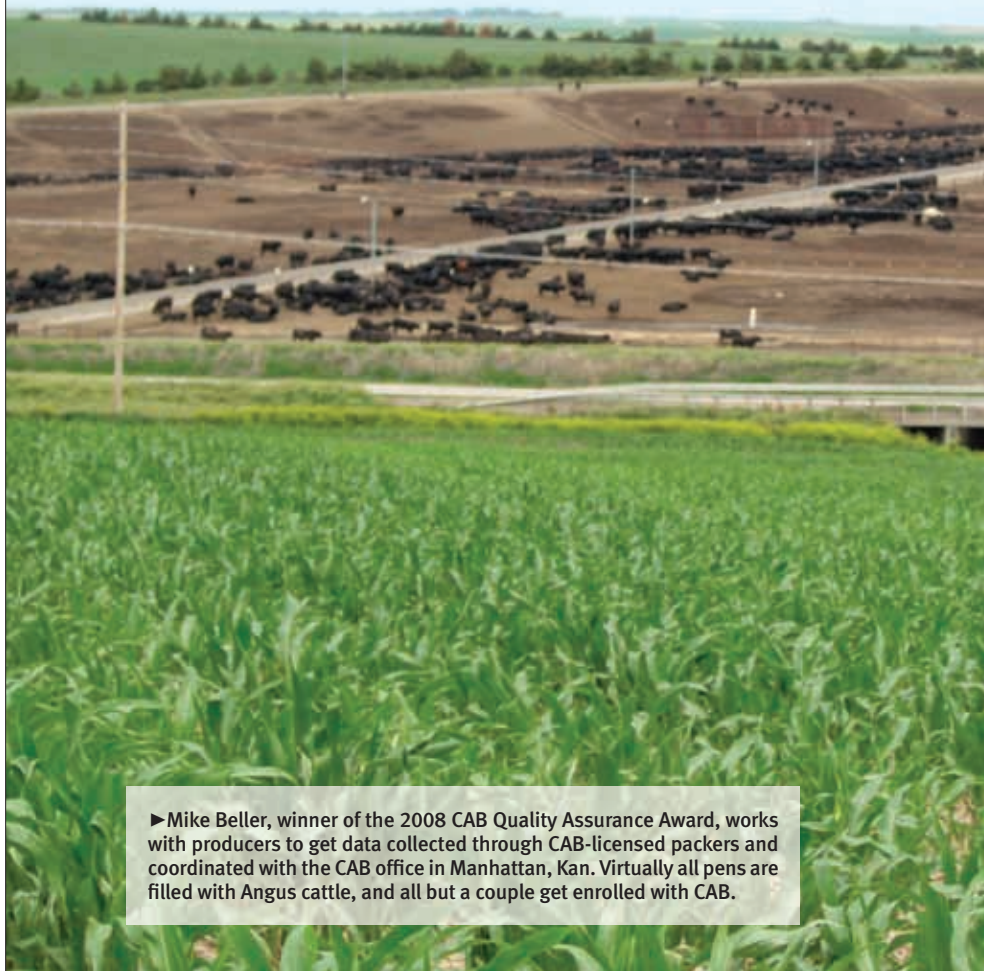
Dykstra says Beller's streamlined system handles financial records, carcass and performance data, inventories, contracts, and environmental compliance documents with ease. But Beller took a roundabout path to become a feedlot quality-assurance (QA) manager.

His father, Jim, established Beller Feedlot in 1958. As a child, Beller remembers learning from his dad and older brothers about cattle, but he also remembers learning about the value of a family-owned business.

After leaving home for college, Beller continued to help out by working part-time as his schedule allowed. Upon graduation, his first job in nearby Columbus, Neb., still allowed for coming home to help on weekends.

In 1994 Beller married his wife, Julie, and they soon moved to Greeley, Colo., so Beller could accept a job at Hewlett-Packard.

Bridging the



► Mike Beller, winner of the 2008 CAB Quality Assurance Award, works with producers to get data collected through CAB-licensed packers and coordinated with the CAB office in Manhattan, Kan. Virtually all pens are filled with Angus cattle, and all but a couple get enrolled with CAB.

High-tech cowboy

The Bellers stayed in Colorado until 2004, when they decided they wanted to raise their two young boys, Tristan and Tate, in a rural setting. Naturally, they came home to Nebraska.

"If you maintain your records, you will eventually find out what works best for you."

—Mike Beller

immediately. He began recording all data electronically and managing the operation's accounting using a computer. He also started encouraging producers to enroll their cattle in age- and source-verified programs.

"It seemed odd to me that I would be working in the feedlot again, but at the same time it just seemed to fit," he says. The feedlot had been CAB-licensed for a few years, so there was an increasing need for feeding and carcass data management.

Beller put his technical knowledge to work

"Being source- and age-verified might cost \$5 more per head, but if you can get \$15 in premiums, I think it's a good deal," Beller says.

In 2007, he helped the feedlot become the first approved for AngusSource®, a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Process Verified Program (PVP).

"The producers do most of the work," Beller says. "My job is to verify that all of the information is accurate and organized." It is Beller's responsibility to make sure all enrolled cattle have the correct AngusSource ear tag; otherwise, the premiums would go out the window.

"Keeping all of the information organized is very important, so I can make sure cattle don't get mixed," he says. "Then if one of them loses a tag, I know the information, and we can get it retagged without making a mistake."

Beller says his technological mind has

the Gap



enrolled cattle qualify for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, with 78.2% USDA Choice. Beller believes part of that success comes from feeding strategies and part from constant interaction with humans.

“We walk through our cattle every day,” he says. “When they first get here they are pretty timid, but by the time they leave, they won’t even get up when you walk by.”

Walking the pens helps prepare cattle for every future interaction, Beller says, and it helps keep them calm all the way to harvest in the packing plants. There must be something to that, because only 0.1% of their cattle were dark cutters last year.

“We have had a lot of new customers because of our relationship with CAB,” Beller says. “The publicity we get from being associated is a tremendous boost in keeping our pens full.”

New customers are a boon, but Beller greatly appreciates those who bring their business year after year. He encourages producers to retain ownership on feed and helps them with records so they can improve their cattle.

“If you maintain your records, you will eventually find out what works best for you,” he says, “whether it is your bulls, cows or even your nutritional program.”

Feedlot family

The feedlot only has four full-time employees, so Beller isn’t spending all of his time in front of the computer screen. He says one of the perks of being a small operation is that every employee knows how to take care of the cattle.

“Even if there was only one person here, the cattle would get fed,” he says. “There aren’t many feedlots where every employee can manage the operation.”

Beller also enjoys the camaraderie that goes along with being a small yard. He loves to crack jokes, and the employees joke right back with him.

He says the laid-back atmosphere at the feedlot has been great for his family. The flexibility of being a small family-owned business allows him to spend more time with Julie and the boys.

Ranchers are much easier to work with than the clients of a big computer corporation, Beller adds. “They understand if it takes you a couple of hours to return a phone call because you are at the pediatrician,” he notes as an example. Ranchers understand a value close to Beller’s heart: family.



helped bring the feedlot up-to-date and current in an increasingly high-tech market.

“Technology is becoming a big part of the cattle business, and that’s where I bridge the gap,” he says.

CAB connection

Beller works with producers to get data collected through CAB-licensed packers and coordinated with the CAB office in Manhattan, Kan. Virtually all pens are filled with Angus cattle, and all but a couple get enrolled with CAB.

His brother and feedlot manager, Terry, noticed early on that the Angus cattle always seemed to perform the best, so he began to encourage customers with those high-quality, black cattle to feed with them. Beller Feedlot became CAB-licensed in 2002 and won Partner of the Year two years later.

During the past year, the 4,800-head-capacity feedlot had more than 32% of



► When Beller returned to the family feedyard, he put his technical knowledge to work immediately. He began recording all data electronically and managing the operation’s accounting using a computer. He also started encouraging producers to enroll their cattle in age- and source-verified programs.