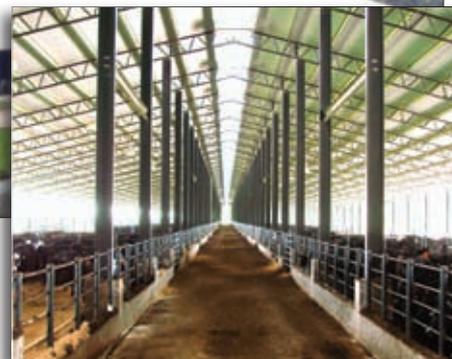




Reduce Stress, Increase Success



Focus on genetics, management and cattle comfort increases quality.

Story & photos by **Lindsay Domer**

Value-added Angus genetics, good management practices and a low-stress environment led Circle A Feeders to a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Quality Focus Award.

The Huntsville, Mo., yard achieved a stellar 61.4% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand and USDA Prime on 917 cattle enrolled through the CAB Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP). That's the highest annual CAB acceptance rate ever, for any CAB feedlot award, says the brand's beef cattle specialist, Gary Fike. To top it off, this was Circle A Feeders' first year in business.

Integrated with the large registered and commercial Angus operation, Circle A Ranch, the feedlot opened in May 2007 to help cow-calf customers realize the profitability of the genetics they purchase. The 5,000-head yard is one of the largest building-enclosed feedlots in the U.S.

All cattle are screened before they are accepted by the feedlot. Cattle must have had two rounds of vaccines, be weaned at least 45 days, individually identified and out of genetics purchased directly from Circle A Ranch. The calves going on feed must also weigh between 600 and 800 pounds (lb.).

Nick Hammett, marketing manager of Circle A Feeders, works closely with producers to get their cattle prepared for the feedlot before they arrive.

"We want healthy cattle that know how to eat when they come in, and that are ultimately going to make a high percent CAB," Hammett says.

To that end, he emphasizes the effect of early nutrition on the early development of intramuscular fat (IMF) and final quality grade. He also works with producers to get cattle accustomed to people.

"We really like calves that are used to seeing a man on foot, so that you can walk through without them scattering," Hammett says. "The calmer cattle make the adjustment to the feedlot faster; they start eating and gaining better, which increases their ability to grade."

Despite the requirements, or perhaps because of them, producers have found it worthwhile to feed with Circle A. It certainly helps that the feedlot buys full interest in all of its customers' qualified cattle up front and pays top-of-the-market price.

"When they walk away with more money in their pocket than they can get anywhere else, they're sold on the program," Hammett says.

Producers can earn \$25-per-head premiums for calves sired by a Circle A bull, \$10 for calves by a Circle A female and another \$10 for age- and source-verification, totaling up to \$45 per head in premiums.

Kenneth Ladyman, cattle manager, says most producers manage so that their calves would qualify, but wouldn't be rewarded for their genetics at some other feedlot.

Circle A also provides full feed-efficiency and carcass data to help customers improve their herds.

"Returning carcass data is a huge benefit," Hammett says. "We know how valuable data has been to the development of our genetics,

and we want our customers to have access to the same decision-making tools we have."

He notes it is difficult to find a feedlot that will return data if there is no retained ownership or partnering. Hammett also analyzes the apparent strengths and weaknesses of each producer's bull selections, and helps them find which sire line brought the most value to their herd, in time for their next bull purchase.

Circle A Ranch created the Angus Sire Alliance and partnered with ABS Global in 2000 to find bulls that could produce highly profitable offspring. That required some feeding research, and that's why Circle A Feeders was built with two pens where cattle are fed in individual bunks.

When each calf comes up to eat, the bunk reads the ear tag and records how much the calf consumes. The data can be traced back to the calf's sire to determine his profitability index. Ladyman says determining the profitability of each calf and its sire is another way Circle A Feeders serves customer needs.

Comfortable cattle

When cattle are delivered to the yard, they are allowed to rest for at least 12 hours before processing. Then, they enter a system so well-designed to minimize stress that it only takes two people to operate.

"With this kind of approach to the chute, the cattle want to load themselves," Ladyman says. It curves around so that cattle entering the chute think they are leaving the way they came in.

The overhead roof also reduces stress. The climate in central Missouri and the production of black cattle were deciding factors in covering the yard, Ladyman says. Every pen is covered to provide protection from the elements. It is

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► **Above:** Circle A Feeders' 5,000-head yard is one of the largest building-enclosed feedlots in the U.S. The climate in central Missouri and the production of black cattle were deciding factors in covering the yard. Every pen is covered to provide protection from the elements.

Quality Focus Award

usually 5° to 10° cooler under the barn than it is outside during the summer, he says, and of course, the roof keeps out snow and rain in the winter.

“Our calves are happy during bad weather,” he says. “They use their energy to go to the feedbunk and eat, rather than for maintaining body temperature.”

Not only are the pens covered, they’re also bedded with sawdust. Every pen gets completely stripped every other week and a new load of sawdust spread out. Ladyman says the sawdust gives the cattle a softer place to lie and has really cut down on the amount of manure that accumulates on them.

The feedyard also has an intense fly-control program. Larvae-eating wasps are actually inserted into the ground in each pen. Fewer flies equals greater cattle comfort.

“We know the cattle at Circle A Feeders have the genetics to produce a consistent, high-quality carcass,” Ladyman says. “We just increase their chances of high performance by increasing their comfort level.”

On the rise?

The record-high CAB acceptance rate may seem like a hard mark to beat, but Ladyman is confident it can be done.

“Last year we were still in the learning curve,” he says. “We just wanted to stay in business and help cattle perform better than they could in a commercial yard. This year should be more profitable.”

The yard has switched from corn to a distillers’ byproduct diet. Ladyman has seen no drawbacks, and the cattle are able to eat more for less money.

“We are always looking to improve the overall product, but we’re also trying to reduce cost without sacrificing quality,” he says.

Having genetically similar cattle contributes much to the success, because all can be pushed hard and still grade well. Genetic consistency helps take the guesswork out of average daily gains and feed efficiencies, Ladyman adds. Cattle fed last year gained an average of about 3.5 lb. per day, he says.

“This program isn’t just for some bulls or some customers,” Hammett says. “It is for every bull, every female and every customer. A load of 10 or a load of 100 can achieve top-of-the-market. As long as the calves meet our specifications, we are happy to have them.”





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