



Pulling Out All Stops

2007 Progressive Partner hits CAB Natural target.

Story & photos by *Miranda Reiman*

Thomas County Feeders will do whatever it takes to keep cattle healthy and get them to grade, even if it means more work.

Manager Mike Hunter and his feedlot crew put extra effort into just about everything, from receiving cattle and getting them up on feed to sorting and marketing. The Colby, Kan., feedlot welcomes cattle with high-quality Bermuda grass hay, free-choice mineral and a clean water tank.

"Some of these calves are naïve to a feedbunk and ration. All they've known is grass all their lives, so they have a tendency to not start on feed as yearlings do," Hunter says. "The Bermuda hay pulls them to the feedbunk and lets them know there are groceries in there."

The feedlot also pays attention to the little details.

"That gives calves a better chance at success from Day 1," he says. "Cattle are never penned unless the bunk is full of hay, the tank is cleaned and mineral is out. The high-quality hay keeps their rumens working, providing a good source of protein until they take off on the ration."

Giving the calves time to adjust is important.

"Depending on pasture conditions, a green calf off the cow has a pretty good chance of being mineral-deficient, so we offer free-choice mineral for a week to 10 days," Hunter says. "Cattle get at least 24 hours' rest before we process them to lower their stress level and let them recuperate from the haul."

"When you go from feeding a high percentage of exotic-cross cattle to feeding some of the best black-Angus cattle in the country, it's a feeling of gratification and accomplishment."

— Mike Hunter

That special care and attention is part of this 18,000-head feedlot's strategy to meet

► **Above:** A member of the BMG, a marketing cooperative of 14 feedyards in Kansas and Nebraska, Thomas County Feeders, managed by Mike Hunter, targets the CAB Natural brand.

the goal of supplying cattle for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) Natural brand.

It does this as a member of the Beef Marketing Group (BMG), a marketing cooperative of 14 feedyards in Kansas and Nebraska. In addition to Thomas County, four other BMG yards are dedicated to the production of natural beef as part of an agreement with Tyson Fresh Meats. To qualify for the natural label, cattle must be individually identified and never receive antibiotics, hormonal implants, ionophores or animal byproducts.

The Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot tries to average at least 80% USDA Choice and 35% CAB.

“They’re not just purchasing black calves. They’re looking for Angus influence and cattle that have been set up to succeed in their system,” Paul Dykstra of CAB says. The beef cattle specialist says Thomas County’s move to both natural and a carcass-quality focus is not common among yards of its size.

“We’re talking about a feedlot that feeds more than 15,000 head at a time. They sell all of them on a grid where they really need to hit a high-quality target to be profitable,” Dykstra says. “That’s a move away from conventional thinking.”

► Thomas County began switching to 100% natural production in November 2005. Phasing out conventional cattle led to many changes for the yard, including an increased emphasis on sorting incoming feeders.

That focus earned the feeder the 2007 CAB Progressive Partner of the Year award. Hunter accepted the award Sept. 15 at the company’s annual conference in Savannah, Ga.

Natural progression

Thomas County began switching to 100% natural production in November 2005. Phasing out conventional cattle led to many changes for the yard. That included increased emphasis on sorting incoming feeders to be penned with cattle of similar frame and flesh.

By spring 2007, the partner yard had harvested, cumulatively, more than 500 head that qualified for CAB’s 30.06 program, a “Bronze Level” achievement. The CAB award recognizes harvest groups that earn more than 30% Prime or CAB acceptance with less than 6% discounts.

“The learning curve for the staff was probably fairly steep as they came to fully embrace all of the management challenges that go along with feeding natural cattle,” Dykstra says. “Not to mention the paperwork and documentation that they’ve imposed on themselves. They adhere to a zero-tolerance policy and have all kinds of quality control measures in place.”

At processing, the crew palpates ears for implants and antibiotics. Cattle foreman

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Mark Bird checks and enters all data. Cattle clerk Rachel Smith double-checks all the records.

“She’ll call the producers up on the phone and ask questions, just making sure they haven’t used any nonconforming products,” Hunter says.

Cattle that pass the test get electronic identification (EID) and assignment to a home pen where they stay until harvest. That is, unless they get sick.

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“If that happens, they are transferred to a fallout pen, never to return to their home pen,” Hunter says.

That prevents the chance for lost tags or treated cattle to be shipped with natural cattle.

“Detecting pneumonia is a little more challenging. You know if you pull an animal and give him an antibiotic, he’s out of the system,” he says. “You have to trust your instincts a little more and give these calves more of a chance than you would conventional cattle.”

But it’s a fine line.

“Sometimes that can bite you,” Hunter admits. “Leaving a calf an extra day can allow the pneumonia to be even more advanced and tougher to treat. Fallouts are still high-quality, and we want to save them all. They are just no longer natural.”

Calves that walk the tightrope between sickness and health find themselves in an observation pen where they get plenty of good hay and extra attention. “We give them every chance we can before we stick that needle in them,” he says.

Cattle that continue in the natural program move up on a ration that gets them gaining from 2.5 to 3 pounds (lb.) per day. Without ionophores, acidosis issues need to be monitored more closely.

“Allowing cattle to become acidotic runs the risk of creating respiratory problems or having a higher incidence of liver damage,” Hunter says. “Both are detrimental to carcass quality.”

Sorting for profit

Months of cautious management culminate in sorting cattle for the BMG Tyson grid.

“I consider that my responsibility,” says Hunter, who spends two to three days a week evaluating market-ready cattle. “Sorting is the livelihood of the whole program. Several hours a week are spent evaluating carcass data and trends of cattle being harvested.”

His visual appraisal led the feedyard to an overall record of 32.3% CAB and Prime for the 2006-2007

award year. He’s also reined in the number of yield grade (YG) 4s and 5s.

“It’s pretty well understood that natural cattle have more backfat and higher yield grades than conventional cattle that have been implanted,” Dykstra says. “Since the first of this year, Mike’s sorting has resulted in a YG 4 level of just 6.7% — about half of the entire industry average.”

The manager says it took some trial and error with the Natural cattle having a different look of finish to them.

After a couple of years of increased attention to all the details, Hunter reflects on the natural high at Thomas County Feeders.

“I don’t know of another feedyard in the United States that has the capacity we do that is 100% natural and black, and that’s very exciting,” Hunter says. “When you go from feeding a high percentage of exotic-cross cattle to feeding some of the best black-Angus cattle in the country, it’s a feeling of gratification and accomplishment.”

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