

Larson Farms, always improving

BIF COMMERCIAL PRODUCER OF THE YEAR NOMINEE

■ By Scarlett Hagins

The Larson family legacy got its start in 1880 with the purchase of 310 acres in eastern Kansas. With an investment of \$3,000 in the land, a total of six beef cows and two dairy cows, Erik Larson planted his roots in the Flint Hills near Green. Today, that family operation is managed by the fifth and sixth generations of Larsons and includes several thousand acres, a 500-head commercial cowherd and a feedyard.

“We don’t do anything special, just put in a lot of hard work and try to improve a little each year,” said Andy Larson who, along with his father Raymond, manages Larson Farms, KLA’s nominee for 2019 Beef Improvement Federation Commercial Producer of the Year. Although retired, his grandfather, Jon, still works on the ranch regularly.

That philosophy has led to growth and advancement. The Angus-based cowherd has steadily grown, with the most recent expansion doubling the head count over the past decade. Calves continually perform well in the feedyard and generate premiums on the rail, with 60% grading Certified Angus Beef and 100% grading Choice or higher. Andy credits his dad for the progression, as it was Raymond who decided to switch completely to Angus more than 20 years ago.

“We have tried a few other breeds over the years, but Angus has proven the most profitable and efficient for us,” said Andy. “They perform well, are vigorous, healthy and have paid their way by capturing premiums through black-hided programs.”

The ranch is home to both fall- and spring-calving herds. Fall cows, which represent three-quarters of the cowherd, calve between August 1 and

November 15. They synchronize between 150 and 200 of their younger fall females to become embryo recipients, with the calves contracted to a local seedstock producer. The rest of the fall cows are bred naturally. Cows in the remaining one-fourth of the herd are bred to calve from February 15 to April 15 using a mix of artificial insemination and natural service.

AI and natural sires are carefully chosen based on maternal and growth EPDs, including calving ease, birthweight and growth potential. Carcass EPDs also are considered, but Andy said top priority is producing a balanced female.

“When I sit down and look at what type of genetics to bring into the herd, I’m looking more for good maternal traits,” he said. “I’m not discounting carcass traits, but at the same time, it is important for me to raise a healthy calf that grows and performs well.”

About 100 heifers are held back as replacements each year, with 30 from the spring group and 60 to 70 from the fall. Those remaining are either bred and sold private treaty or fed to finish in the feedyard. All steers are backgrounded on the ranch and either finished onsite or sent to a western Kansas feedyard. Whether fed on the ranch or off, the Larsons retain ownership through to the packer. The calves are marketed through U.S. Premium Beef.

“We get a complete set of harvest data back on all our calves, which is extremely important because it allows us to look back and see if we are making a positive impact based on the genetics we are purchasing,” said Andy.

“Always Improving” could be a motto for Larson Farms. Whether it is making sure the cowherd is healthy and productive, the calves perform well in the feedyard and on the rail or the pastures are well-managed through prescribed burning and good grazing practices, the Larsons are constantly striving to get better. This mentality extends to their role in the bigger livestock industry. For example, they have chosen to participate in the new CattleTrace pilot project that involves an end-to-end disease traceability system, with the goal of developing a cost-effective program that can work at the speed of commerce on the national level. The Larsons will tag their fall calves this spring with ultra-high frequency ear tags that can be scanned at participating feedyards and packing plants.

“Steady growth and incremental improvement; that’s our long-term goal, with the hope that in the end, whatever we do is beneficial to future generations,” said Andy. ■



Pictured are (L to R) Jon, Andy and Raymond Larson.