

Meet the Beef

A group of meat case managers from Quality Food Centers, a national grocery store chain based in Washington State, visits with Robb Forman during a hayride through the cows on his family-owned and operated Trinity Farms near Ellensburg. The Formans partnered with the folks at Certified Angus Beef (CAB) to set up the educational, eye-opening event.

Grocery store meat managers visit a ranch for an eye-opener



BY CORINNE PATTERSON

Trinity Farms near Ellensburg, Washington.



With no more than two to three percent of the American population directly involved in production agriculture today, cattle producers face a major public relations hurdle. As an industry, cattlemen have embraced the idea that they are selling beef and not simply passing cattle to the next person in the marketing chain. But in reality a cattleman is still far removed from the actual meat counter where consumers make up their minds as to what meat choices they will add to their weekly menus.

Robb Forman and his family, who run Trinity Farms near Ellensburg, Washington, partnered with Certified Angus Beef (CAB) to help bridge the gap between producer and the meat counter. In September 2009 they welcomed to their ranch about 80 meat case managers from Quality Food Centers (QFC), a national grocery store chain based out of Seattle, Washington, to tell their story about raising beef.

"It's one of those things where you go into it and you never know what to expect, and it was a terrific opportunity," Robb Forman says. "It helped me recognize that we need to do a lot more of this as an industry to try to educate the general public."

It was clear to Forman from the very beginning that this ranch visit wouldn't be a one-way educational street.

"It was quite surprising because we all have our preconceived notions in life as to what things are, what they should be and what you think they are going to be. I saw people with tattoos and guys with earrings — they were all from the west side of the state, which is a pretty metropolitan area all through the I-5 corridor," Forman recalls. "At first when I saw some of those people I was a little shocked that these are quote / unquote meat managers marketing the beef industry's product. But as the day went on they were very interested and engaged."

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Once the crew had settled in on the ranch for the day, Forman took the opportunity to introduce the meat case specialists to the beef industry. During his introduction, he pulled seven different people from the audience and gave each a title that represented a segment of the beef industry ranging from purebred producer, commercial cattleman, livestock auction owner, feedlot owner all the way to the retail beef case manager in a QFC store.

"The point of all that was to try to emphasize how far removed we are as beef producers from the general buying public and to help them understand how much we appreciate their efforts at the retail level. Truly, they are probably more of the face of the beef industry today than we are as cow calf producers because we are out here in the country, and not very many people come to see each of us each year," Forman says.

"It was really eye opening for them and for us when you put it in a format where everyone can visualize how many steps there are in the chain and how many times that ownership may change," he continues. "Then to realize that in most areas of the country at whatever meat counter at whatever gro-

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cery store they truly are the face of the beef industry today. They are the ones the consumer gets to see on a day-in, day-out basis representing our product."

FAMILY PARTNERSHIP ON THE CATTLE

Forman's parents, Mike and Paulette, began their married life in the hustle and bustle of the quickly urbanizing area of western Washington. But with Mike's dairy upbringing and Paulette's desire to ranch, the couple moved with their two young boys to eastern Washington at the base of the Cascade Mountains and started out small in the livestock business with a flock of sheep. While in high school, Robb's interest in livestock grew and what was once his

parents' commercial cow herd became a purebred Simmental and Angus operation raising bulls to market to commercial cattlemen.

By spring 1990 an official partnership was formed between Robb and his parents, and the main ranch headquarters were purchased later that fall. In 1991 Robb married Debbie, and they've added four livestock-enthusiastic kids to the operation; Chelse, Mackenzie, Chance and Colton.

For Robb, the opportunity to be a part of a beef industry that has provided increased efficiencies of production through genetic improvement, best management practices and good stewardship is one of the greatest honors of being a cattleman today.



The Forman family; in the back from the left is Chance, Debbie, Mike, Paulette, and Robb. Up front is Mackenzie (L), Colton in the middle and Chelse (R).

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"Most the people who you meet in the beef industry are just terrific, salt of the earth, hardworking people who only want to do the best, not only for themselves, but their customers and the environment. It's a great community to be involved in, but I don't think we do a great job of telling our story."

It's hard to begin telling the story of an industry that has prided itself on the independence and seclusion that has been dramatized through the American cowboy at box offices across the country. But the beginning may be as close to home as the 5 or 6 miles of county roads the Formans use to trail their cattle from pasture to pasture.

"We just moved cattle again last weekend, and it's funny because the people who have lived here all their lives understand and deal with it. The people who have migrated here from those metropolitan areas, they can have

a real hardship with it. If it wasn't so frustrating, it would be humorous," Robb says. "When you're trying to move 300 or 400 cows down the road and they're driving their white Escalade car through them I guess they get an education they don't want some days."

Times have changed and big money has changed the perception of production agriculture. But Robb knows there's hope in educating the public, who are far removed in their concrete jungle, about the importance of agriculture to feed the world and to protect the environment.

"At one point in time I can remember back in the 70's particularly in this county where we live — and I'm sure it's true probably everywhere — where it was a big deal if you were a cattleman," he continues. "If you were a cattleman you were somebody. Today that perception doesn't seem to be the

same to me. In some circles and with some groups of environmental people with agendas on their plates, it's become somewhat of a dirty word and that's just a shame, it really is."

Beef production has changed in the valley where the Formans call home. Robb says with the advent of the Timothy hay market to Japan every parcel of land that could be hayed was converted from pastureland that previously supported cow calf pairs. Today's hay meadows leave only the skeletons of well-built gathering facilities scattered across the country as reminders that the fences have come down.

While only three or four of the larger-sized commercial herds remain near Trinity Farms, the Formans continue to breed their 450 cows with the intentions of selling purebred Angus, Simmental and Sim-Angus bulls. With about 125 bulls to sell annually in

March, they've built their customer base along the West coast and into the northern tier states and even Hawaii.

Robb says, "We'll sample a couple of young sires each year on a limited basis but other than that the majority of the cattle we breed to are older, high proven, high accuracy bulls. We want to take as much of the guess work out of it as we can and also ensure that we're providing a kind of 'take it to the bank' situation for our customer."

Most of Trinity Farms customers need bulls for spring calving herds, so calving begins in January to have bulls that are 15 to 16 months of age by the time commercial cattlemen turn them out. The cow herd is mass-synchronized and each cow has an opportunity to be bred by artificial insemination twice before they are turned out with the bulls. They also take advantage of an extensive embryo transfer program and have



Robb Forman leads a 20 minute discussion explaining all the steps it takes to get the beef from the pasture to the meat case. "It was really eye opening for them and for us when you put it in a format where everyone can visualize how many steps there are in the chain and how many times that ownership may change," says Robb.

found it to be a good tool in creating a homogenous cow herd more quickly.

On the valley floor, which receives only about nine inches of rain annually, the stocking rate is about two to two and a half acres per pair. This leaves them enough grass to stockpile forage. Winter feeding begins around Christmas time, and the Formans take advantage of being able to grow high-quality Timothy hay and exchange their crop at a 3 to 1 ratio for feeder hay from across the Columbia River.

The Formans background all of their calves, including the bulls, in a small development lot on the ranch where they get a high roughage diet.

"We have four hay brokers that press hay for the export market. They double compress the hay and put it in the export containers, it gets hauled to the port and shipped across the ocean," Robb says. "We have a contract with one of those press outfits that we also sell our hay to. We purchase all the chaff from them, which is basically all the loose hay that comes off the press, and that's what we use for the forage for the

cattle in the lot. We use some byproducts to add to that. We have a vertical mixer so that we can create a total mixed ration to develop the bulls."

FOR THE RECORD

There is one thing cattlemen and meat case managers easily have in common, and that's an understanding of the numbers. While the data collected may be different for each business segment, both require record keeping and checks and balances.

Robb learned he could ask any of the meat case managers what their volume of sales was the preceding week, and they could tell him exactly how much meat their counter had moved.

"The reason why I asked that question was to help them understand how we can tell them exactly which calf came from which cow, how the calves performed, and what the expected performance of calves out of a particular sire would be so they could relate to it from a data collection standpoint," he points out.

While Robb is engrossed with his



The Formans breed their 450 cows with the intentions of selling purebred Angus, Simmental and Sim-Angus bulls. They offer 125 bulls at their sale each March.



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Mike (L), Paulette and Robb Forman receive a nice, big clock as a thank-you gift for hosting the CAB event.

data and his ability to improve his herd through expected progeny differences (EPDs), DNA testing, embryo transfer and artificial insemination, he understands the importance of relating why he would care about this kind of data and why advanced tools are important. But he was also careful not to bore his audience with the details that seem fascinating to him, but might bore an outsider.

“The number one thing for improvement for us is the phrase, ‘What gets measured gets done.’ You can single-trait select for anything and make remarkable improvement in a hurry if you have a clear and defined goal, and you have a process in place to measure what you’re doing on whatever regular interval to affect change and achieve that goal,” Robb says. “The challenge we have here at the ranch particularly being a seedstock producer is trying to make those cattle very well rounded and fit all aspects of the industry.”

For many of the meat case managers attending the ranch demonstration, it was the first time that they had the opportunity to get up close and personal with a beef animal. Robb witnessed their enjoyment of being able to touch the animal and learn just how much stewardship goes into raising beef to feed the world.

“Most of them had seen cattle before, but it may have been at 70

miles per hour traveling down the freeway. They hadn’t had a real up close and personal experience, and certainly most of them had not had a ranch experience where they could be out there and see the facilities.”

Telling the beef industry’s story is about connecting with people in a way they can relate to. If the story is made personal — even if it’s not one-on-one at the ranch — that connec-

tion can be made, and what a great story the beef industry has to share.

“The biggest thing in this for me is realizing that we do have a terrific story in the industry,” Robb adds. “We have a fantastic history and probably an even more exciting future when you consider the advancements we’ve already made in such a short amount of time. It’s exciting to think what’s coming next within our industry.” **WR**



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Meat managers from Quality Food Centers try to guess the weight of the bull. Most of the participants in the day-long visit never get much chance to see where the delicious beef they handle actually comes from, and how much professional effort it takes on the part of ranchers to get it to the meat case.

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