



Diversity includes Angus that mean business.

Story & photos by **Becky Church**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Wisconsin is a land of corn and cows, mostly known for dairy production. Brian Nodolf knows all about that, having grown up on a dairy farm near Livingston, Wis., in the 1960s and 1970s, and then earning his degree in dairy science from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

That side of farming has little to do with Nodolf's life today, largely because of a part-time job he took while in high school at a local but large and diversified Angus cattle and farming company owned by the Biddick family.

Something must have clicked for both sides on that first encounter, because before Nodolf was halfway through college, the Biddicks offered him a full-time job. He accepted a couple years later and now serves as president of the closely held corporation Biddick Inc.

Like any farm, there is no typical day, but this 5,000-acre operation may be more diversified than most. Nodolf keeps an open mind about new enterprises every year.

"We kind of have a pilot project to grow some oats," he says. Not just any oats, but several fields of BetaGene oats known for heart-healthy fiber in human food, and a few

more fields of Quest malting barley, "because of all the microbreweries in Wisconsin."

That supplements the focus on 1,500 acres each of seed corn and soybeans, and a booming 1,000-acre popcorn division (their Rural Route 1 brand is sold widely). That business was born when USDA's Payment in Kind (PIK) Program restricted field corn acres in the early 1980s.

Calves closer to home

Nodolf describes Biddick Inc. as "a complicated business." Cattle have been a mainstay since the 1900s, even before seed corn, which began in 1906 and sold the family's Trelay brand to Monsanto in 2005. From the start, they expanded in cattle, sheep and pigs.

"Traditionally, in those days the family went out west by train to Nebraska and Kansas to buy calves," he says. "They would bring calves back to feed silage through the winter and graze through the summer before heading to the Chicago Stockyards, then hopping on a train and doing it all over again."

After World War II, when High Plains irrigation sprouted western feedlots



► The Biddick family's 5,000-acre operation may be more diversified than most. While owning a registered-Angus herd of more than 200 head, they feed about 1,000 steers at a time and, among other things, focus on 1,500 acres each of seed corn and soybeans, and a booming 1,000-acre popcorn division (their Rural Route 1 brand is sold widely).

and packing plants, the Biddicks found themselves at a freight disadvantage. They started buying feeder cattle at auction barns around the tri-state Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin areas and were among the first to feed Holstein steers.

“Back in the ’60s, you had Angus that were 2½-pound-a-day gainers. Holsteins would probably gain 3½ and be framier. A lot has changed since then, and now we don’t feed any Holsteins,” Nodolf explains.

Breeding, feeding Angus

The shift came through a purchase of registered yearling Angus heifers from Tennessee in the 1970s, which they bred for half spring-, half fall-calving herds.

“The fall calving works better to sell bulls since many of our customers have around 25 cows,” Nodolf says.

“They might breed 25 cows and five heifers every year. A yearling bull that’s just 14 months old is a bit of a stretch sometimes on 25 cows. Whereas a fall yearling bull, 200 to 300 pounds heavier, can handle that size herd better.”

Biddick feeds about 1,000 steers at a time and a decade ago that part of the business was a licensed *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) partner. Relationships with bull customers still form the basis of the feedlot enterprise.

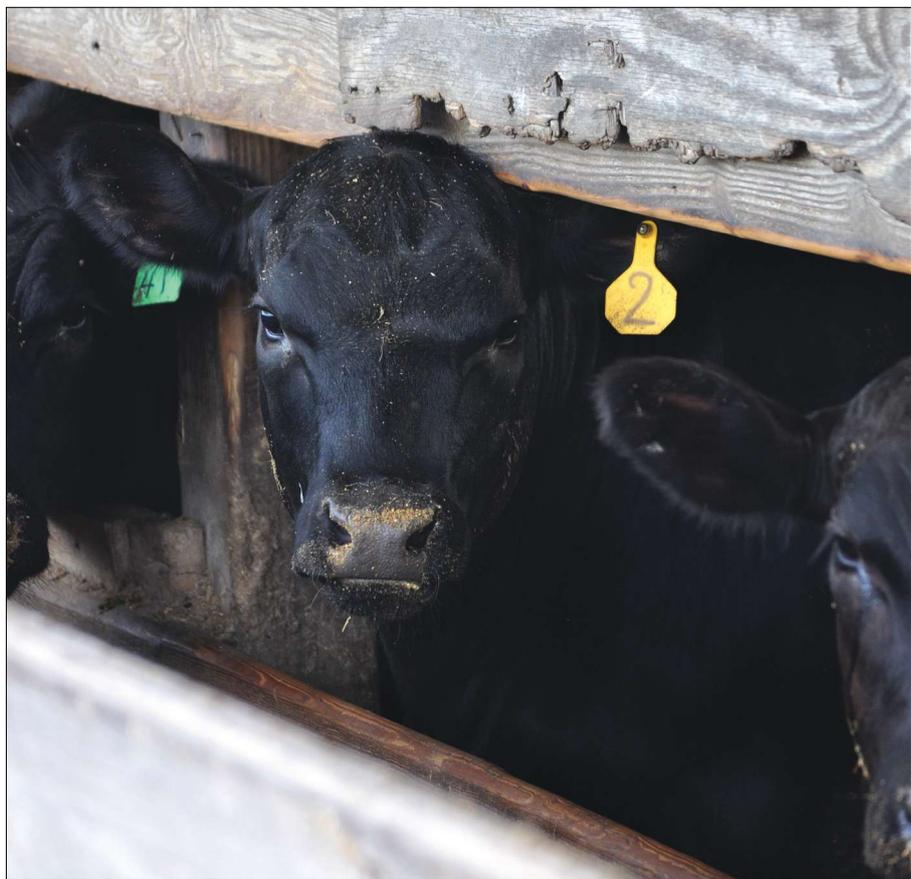
There’s no formal calf buy-back program, but they sell bulls locally and buy calves back from their customers, filling up the yard in November and December, fattening them till May, June and July. Sales are to Tyson and through Bloomington Livestock, which brokers the cattle where they find the best market. Some years, they buy more of those calves and finish them at Midwest Feeders, near Maple Park, Ill.

With a long history of breeding and feeding Angus cattle, the company still maintains a focus on marbling that can achieve CAB acceptance (premium Choice).

“We select for calving ease, growth, carcass potential, sound feet and legs — and disposition is becoming increasingly important,” Nodolf says. “Everybody is getting older, so we’re not very tolerant of a wild animal. If a yearling heifer is too wild and really causing problems, they will go to the feedlot. It’s easier to put a heifer in the feedlot rather than worry about how to market her.”

The company sends bulls to the Wisconsin Beef Improvement Association performance test at Platteville, Wis.

“Two years ago we did a DNA test there and found more switch in the calves than we expected,” Nodolf says. “Now we make a point of testing everything for parentage. This year, we’ve got multi-bull pastures, two or three bulls per group to shorten calving



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season a bit, and it will be interesting to see how productive one bull is over another.”

Herd health is critical with outside calf crops coming and going.

“Every animal gets vaccinated numerous times,” Nodolf says. “We try to avoid contact with feedlot cattle, but with shared facilities and not being a closed herd, we vaccinate more than some places would, using a lot of modified-live vaccines.”

A field trial last year on one group convinced the cattle manager to use LongRange™ dewormer. Not only were there no parasite eggs to be found, Nodolf noticed fewer flies overall. To make double-sure, he uses insect growth regulator (IGR) blocks, fly tags or pour-on to keep summer flies at bay.

Both seed- and popcorn are “harvested on husk” and dried in bins rather than

conventional combining, to avoid cracking. That strategy leaves a “huge pile of husks, which we add corn syrup to and feed as corn silage.”

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The quality is 360 degrees.

“Biddick Inc. seed is ISO (Organization for Standardization) registered,” he says. “It is a quality program, and we use the same ISO on the cattle side and apply the same principles. Employee training is important. All (50 of them, plus interns) go through management and safety training.”

The registered-Angus herd includes more than 200 head and the next consideration after DNA testing is to multiply the best lines through embryo transfer, Nodolf says.

“We’re a larger operation, but we pay attention to details,” he adds. “We don’t do something just because that’s the way we’ve always done it. Tradition is worth something. You don’t just change for the sake of change, but if there is a reason to change, you need to make sure you’re there.”



Editor’s Note: Becky Church is an industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.