# Canadian Luing Cattle Association Newsletter

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**Message From The Secretary**

*Iain Aitken*

Welcome to our 2019 Summer Newsletter. It is shaping to be a year of mixed weather fortunes across the Prairies. Most areas had a very dry spring but it seemed to change in many areas around the middle of June. In SW Manitoba we were fortunate to receive over 10" of rain in the following month before it turned dry again. By all accounts in some areas of Alberta the rain never stopped once it started and it has been impossible to harvest hay crops at all.

Unfortunately some areas never got enough rainfall to break the drought cycle started last year. The Interlake and parts of northern Manitoba are particularly badly hit as are parts of Saskatchewan and Alberta. With this combination of events winter feed supplies across the prairies seem sure to be in short supply once again.

Nothing highlights the importance of winter feed costs to overall ranch profitability like the years when you don't have enough and the options to purchase are priced exorbitantly.

In this edition's breeder profile I have highlighted an operation which has taken steps to increase profitability by managing their forage resources to extend the grazing season and changing breeds to allow them to harvest this production more effectively.

*Special thanks to Camille Reesor for providing all the photographs used in this Newsletter.*

Hopefully our readers, where ever you are, manage to secure the feed to carry your herds through another winter!

**Breeder Profile - The Reesor family, Irvine, Alberta**

*Iain Aitken*

This year's ranch focus is on Two C Ranching run by Craig and Camille Reesor and their twin sons Logan and Brody. Their extensive land-base south of the Hamlet of Walsh in South East Alberta comprises a lot of open rangeland as well treed areas on the North slope of the Cypress hills. Although the Cypress Hills attract more rainfall than surrounding areas this is still one of the drier areas of the prairies so drought is an ever present risk.

The scenes depicted in the beautiful photographs Camille captures are reminiscent of the pioneer ranching days of Southern Alberta. The big skies over herds of cows strung out to the horizon under the watchful eyes of cowboys. In the wet years waist deep grass and shiny cows like those pictured below are every cattleman's dream.

Befitting the traditions of the area the cattle work is all done on horseback. Craig, Camille and their young sons are all accomplished horse people proficient in riding, roping and capable of handling any bovine challenge encountered out on the open range. In addition to being a mainstay of operating the ranch their horses are also part of a very successful Quarter horse breeding/training program that sees the Two C working ranch horses in great demand across the continent.

Despite the iconic images ranches don't survive in the modern world on tradition alone and this young couple are ahead of the times with their progressive ranch management and interest in continued learning. They very much enjoy getting off the ranch several times a year and visiting other ranches and taking schools including Ranching for Profit, Holistic Management and attending events with grazing gurus like Joel Salatin and Steve Kenyon.

Since taking over running Craig's 5th generation family ranch in 2016 with the aim of becoming a year round grazing operation they have moved their calving season to May/June to get their production cycle more in tune with nature. Another change the Reesors have made is discontinuing hay making on the ranch. They now graze the hay land with pairs and yearlings from May through August. This allows them to save all their native range for winter grazing usually only supplemented by protein blocks.

Young animals are brought home around January and are then bale grazed on the former hay land using purchased feed. One advantage of this area is they don't generally get the deep, unrelenting snow cover that makes winter grazing difficult in some other parts of the Prairies. However due to the nature of the terrain winter storms can be severe so they try to utilize areas closer to the Cypress hills where there are more trees and undulating land to provide shelter during the worst winter weather.

Craig and Camille took over a mixed cow herd that were a cross section of today's mainstream genetics. Many of the cows had been sourced through the auction mart so were not adapted to their unique land-base. Although there were some very good cows some were too big, others had too much milk or not enough flesh for their environment which was resulting in too many cows failing to get pregnant.

The Reesors decided that breeding their own replacements would give them animals better adapted to their environment. They began to look for genetics to replicate the best of what they already had, while avoiding the extremes, thereby hopefully reducing the wastage. By chance they encountered a small nucleus of purebred Luings near Maple Creek. One bull and these few females became their first Luing purchase in 2017 and they have since bought over 30 Luing bulls for their herd. This summer, for the first time, the entire herd of 600 head will be bred to Luing bulls.

This is not terrain for the expensive, over-fed bulls common in the mainstream purebred sector. The distances they have to cover would take their toll on the feet and legs of many of the bulls that are artificially pushed for a lot of growth at an early age. The Reesor's experience with naturally reared quarter horses gives them the confidence to buy cattle that would be considered under-developed by many people's standards. With this in mind we have shipped yearling bulls to them in the last couple of years to allow them to grow out naturally in their new environment and adapt to the hard grass prevalent in the area before being put to heavier use as two year olds.

*First calf heifer, Luing x calves and two year old Luing bulls.*

The family do not intend to breed pure Luings other than the original females they bought and their offspring which now total around 16 head. Luing bulls are being used to stamp a desirable type across the herd. Once that is

achieved they will probably seek complimentary types from a different breed to maintain heterosis in the herd. At the present time most of the surplus offspring are sold as calves but in future they would like the flexibility to sell calves, yearlings or bred females as the market dictate.

*Two C cows on winter range.*

It is still early days for this breeding project with only two years of Luing x Angus/Hereford heifers in the herd but early results are promising according to Camille:

"*The Luings have been wonderful for us so far. We were in need of hardy line-bred , maternal bulls to cross our cow herd of Angus /Hereford base. We aim for a 1150-1200lb cow with excellent mothering ability against predators, easy handling disposition, hair coat and sound conformation. We calve all our heifers out on the range with the cows, so Luing bulls with their easy calving, vigorous born calves work very well with little monitoring. The Luing has been the breed we were searching for to reach our holistic goals on our ranch."*

**Heifer Development**

*Iain Aitken*

Having read many articles on heifer development over the years it seems there are as many opinions as there are breeds!

While most ranches in western Canada expose their heifers to calve around two year olds I see a number of breeders now promoting first breeding at two to calve down as three year olds. I'm sure the latter was fairly common practice before the advent of better winter feeding systems and faster growing genetics. I know that in Scotland calving at three years was common practice until fairly recently and I can still remember some Galloway breeders that used to advocate calving their heifers for the first time at four years old as they felt the extra year up front was rewarded by several extra years of service at the end of their careers.

Let's first consider developing heifers to breed as yearlings to calve at two. From a performance point of view most ranchers weaning a heifer calf in the 450-550lb range in the fall have to overwinter that calf so that it gains enough weight and reaches puberty by breeding season the following summer. Although the daily weight gain required to achieve this looks easily attainable on paper it does require some good quality feed. It is unlikely that calves would gain enough on a diet of hay alone and are likely to need supplemental energy especially if they experience prolonged periods

of very cold weather - something not unusual in Western Canada.

Research done at the Clay Centre, Nebraska in the 1990's indicates that heifer calves do not need to experience a constant and relatively high rate of gain from weaning to breeding in order to conceive. They experimentally fed three groups of heifers different rations - one group to gain 1.25 lb/day for the 205 day test, the second limit fed to gain 1lb /day and the third group fed to gain 0.5lb/ day for the first 84 days followed by 1.5lbs/day for the remaining 121 days. They were subsequently grouped together in a breeding pasture and the results showed no difference in performance between the different groups.

The percentage pregnant as heifers, the age at conception, percentage that bred back after the first calf, calf birth weight and calf weaning weight were identical across the three groups.
This highlights an opportunity to save on development costs if we can bring the heifers through the coldest part of winter at a reduced rate of gain and rely on compensatory growth to bring them to acceptable breeding condition by the time the bulls go out. This will work best if you calve somewhat it tune with nature and can utilize the early summer flush of grass for the compensatory gain period. One caution with this approach is that you have to be careful not to under-develop the heifers as it's all too easy for a period of severe weather to curtail weight gain and then you could run out of time for them to catch up by breeding season.

*Wide open spaces - trailing heifers on the Two C Ranch.*

A correlation exists between a heifer's weight as a percentage of its expected mature weight and when it can be expected to reach puberty. It has long been said that around 90% of heifers will reach puberty by the time they reach 60% of their mature weight. On the other hand at 55% of their mature weight only 47% of heifers can be expected to have reached puberty. This will vary somewhat between different breeds and cattle types but it does give an indication of how thin a line we are walking between adequately or under-developing replacement heifers.

Getting heifers pregnant is only the first part of the process. They have to carry this pregnancy to term, calve successfully and rear their calf while getting pregnant again. On an industry wide basis there are a huge number of young females that don't breed back

after their first calf. A lot of these young open cows will stem from ranchers running them with mature cows during the winter feeding period. I have always found that they just can't compete with the larger, older cows and the problem seems to get worse as herd size increases. We have run our first calf heifers and coming second calvers as a separate group for over 30 years and find it makes a considerable difference to breed back. Simply providing the same ration, but in a situation where these young cows don't have to compete with mature cows, is often

*Cross-bred heifer calf exhibiting strong Luing characteristics.*

enough but if feed resources are limited it pays to target the best quality to the younger cows.

A trend that I read about is ranchers attempting to select for fertility in their replacement heifers by exposing a large number to bulls but only for a limited period, often 21 days. The theory behind this is sound enough as the most fertile cattle will reach puberty first and are most likely to be the earliest calvers throughout their careers. The risk I see with this is that if your heifers have been under-developed you might only get a very small number bred. If you get 60% bred in 21 days that might provide plenty herd replacements - but if you only get 10% bred you might have a costly wreck on your hands.

We have always exposed our heifers to the bull for the same period as the cows - two and a half cycles or around 55 days. My experience with our cattle is there is no measurable longterm difference in fertility between heifers calving in the first and second cycles but almost everything calving in the third cycle as a heifer is sub-fertile and gets culled out of the herd as an open before five years old.

I'll now return to the topic of exposing heifers for the first time as two year olds. These older heifers certainly don't need the high quality feeds the yearlings do as they should all be heavy enough and should all be cycling by breeding time even on a minimal ration. Countering that saving on feed quality there is obviously an increase in feed quantity needed as the heifers have to be kept for an additional 365 days before giving you their first calf. In my experience giving heifers that extra year will also increase mature cow weights within

your herd which will require yet more feed for maintenance on an annual basis.
One advantage of bigger, older heifers is that they should be able to compete better with mature cows and it may be possible to run the whole herd in one group versus two separate groups. A downside of breeding them as two year olds is that you lose any opportunity to select the earliest maturing ones as they should all be cycling by the time they are exposed to the bull.

Having calved both two year old and three year old heifers I must say I prefer calving two year olds as I find they have better maternal instincts with their first calf. We don't have many heifers that aren't interested in their calves when they are born but I've definitely had more cases among three year olds than two year olds.

In conclusion I think there is no right or wrong way to develop heifers as long as a good proportion of them become successful members of your herd. Different ranch operations will have different forage and feed resources, different environmental conditions and different financial situations. We must each find the system that works best for our individual circumstances.

**Looking Back**

*Glenn Webber*

Forty years ago the Canadian Luing Cattle Association held it's 2nd production sale at the Stampede Park in Calgary. On offer from five consignors were 28 lots of Luing cattle, with 11 bulls and 17 females.

In the Sale Program, Breed President Walter Wearmouth said:

"*The Luing Cattle have not been a breed officially in Canada very long to prove and establish itself, however the same crosses that went into that breed are proven here. Many years ago a commercial cattleman, in B.C crossed Shorthorn and Highland and then mated to crossbred females and cross bulls to what he called the "Snowlanders". He found them extremely hardy, fertile and excellent mothers. Being the same as Luing in Scotland they have been accepted in the Luing Herd Book."*

The 1979 sale included 2 bulls and 5 females from Charlie Flick, the originator of the Snowlander. These would be the first polled cattle sold at a Luing sale in Canada. His breeding program, using polled Shorthorn bulls, made a major contribution to the development of the Luing breed in Canada and we will share that story in a future edition.

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