Canadian Luing Cattle Association Newsletter

Volume 10, No. 1 January 2016

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

Iain Aitken

Happy New Year and welcome to our 2016 winter newsletter. Our move to Manitoba kept me busy in 2015 but now that we are settled in for winter I plan to overhaul our website www.luingcattle.com so look out for updates by spring! Despite moving to SW Manitoba we will still be supplying bulls to customers across the four western provinces (and beyond if the demand is there.) Please contact me if you need bulls this spring as we still have some available and I also maintain a list of cattle for sale from the other breeders.

With a growing number of repeat buyers we only managed to supply six new customers in 2015.

Thank you and welcome to the world of Luings:

Mathew Benedict, Rimbey, Alberta
Dylan Biggs, TK Ranch, Coronation, Alberta
Farmland Legacies, Wynyard, Saskatchewan
Les Fenwick, Bluffton, Alberta
Brian Luce, Crestomere, Alberta
Dave Scott, Oxbow, Saskatchewan

This year marks two important milestones for the Luing breed. In Scotland the breed will celebrate the 50th anniversary of gaining it's official breed status. This year also marks the 40th anniversary of the formation of the Canadian Luing Cattle Association. 2015 saw the largest number of Canadian Luing registrations since the1970s and we are looking forward to continued growth this year.

What a remarkable couple of years it has been in the cattle business! All classes of stock reached price levels we wouldn't have believed even four years ago. Of course we all knew that prices couldn't keep on rising but the large drop in values from September through to year end clearly put us on the downhill slope of the cattle cycle. Hopefully in the New Year prices will stabilize somewhat and allow us an extended period of profitable, if not spectacular prices.
If profit is our goal we need to keep our pencils as sharp as they were to survive the BSE decade. To that end I have written an article on cow efficiency highlighting some research that questions the genetic direction of today's mainstream cattle breeding.

Cow Efficiency

Iain Aitken

Spring must be just around the corner as the bull sale adverts are starting to appear in our cattle magazines. Soon the glossy sale catalogs will start arriving in the mail, proclaiming this year's bulls to be their best ever - usually "best" by virtue of more growth and higher EPD numbers across most traits. Most also promise to change your cow herd and profitability for the better. I think we should examine the need to be constantly changing the genetics in our herds. Luckily there is a wealth of research being done, particularly in the United States that should give us pause for thought before rushing off to buy the latest and greatest increased performance genetics.

Some sobering research out of North Dakota recently shows that the cost of producing a weaned calf there doubled between 2000 and 2014. From a financial perspective inflation was obviously a factor but not responsible for this cost doubling. In fact none of the major inputs involved have doubled so the conclusion is that slippage of cost control by the rancher during times of high cattle prices is part of the problem. A big part of this slippage is the physical performance of the cowherd, due in part to the type of cattle being run. The research showed that cow mature weights increased but calf weaning weights didn't rise at a corresponding rate. There were more open cows and less calves weaned per 100 cows exposed. All these factors combined led to the cost per pound of calf sold relative to number of cows exposed doubling in 14 years.

Selection for increased growth has been a constant for decades so it is little surprise that mature cow weights have grown steadily. Yet North Dakota research indicates the calf weaning weights haven't kept pace. David Lalman with Oklahoma State University gathered data from Montana, Arkansas and Oklahoma showing that every extra 100lbs of cow weight only produced on average an extra 6lbs of weaned calf.

In combination with increased mature cow weight the potential for increased milk production comes into play. Alan Newport editor of Drovers CattleNetwork reports that a USDA research facility in Oklahoma found that Brangus cows with the genetic potential to produce more than the 11-15lbs of milk optimal for that environment actually produced less than that as the forage couldn't meet their production demands. He went on to state that milk EPDs in most major breeds have climbed steadily and today are probably above optimal in many, if not most, environments.

If we have such widespread evidence that we are losing ground on cow efficiency because they have too much mature size and milk potential for their environment why does the race for ever bigger and milkier purebreds continue?
Burke Teichert, a retired manager for Deseret Land and Cattle maybe says it best when he affirms that selection for EPDs works, and if we want lots of growth and milk, we can get it. The problem is that it

always comes with a cost – it may be in reproduction, herd health, reduced stocking rates or higher levels of fed feed. Excesses in growth, milk, size and muscle can cause real problems in herds producing their own replacements. He advises ranchers to select bulls that will produce daughters (your future cows) that are adapted to your environment and management.

His advice for attaining a profitable herd is to have one that requires very little in overheads, equipment, facilities and labor. The cows must fit your environment and get by with little help from the owner. They must meet most of their feed needs through grazing recognizing that minimal and timely supplementation will pay good dividends. His biggest criteria is that reproduction rates must be excellent. If a cow, under the conditions described above, won't rebreed and wean a good calf, she's a failure; and you don't want many failures. The cows that do get pregnant and wean a calf every year won't be high-milking cows and their calves won't be the biggest in the neighborhood. However, your whole herd or ranch could be weaning more pounds of calf per acre than those with significantly bigger calves.

I think there are lessons for Canadian ranchers from this American research. As long as most ranchers remain price-takers in a commodity system the advantage will always accrue to the lowest cost producers. I firmly believe Luing genetics can enable ranchers to lower their production costs. The ability and willingness to utilize lower quality feed combined with their extra winter hair coat allows them to graze more comfortably in inclement weather. These factors give Luing cattle a significant advantage in extended season grazing systems. In Canada, more so than in the US, cow wintering costs will always be the biggest production cost affecting our profitability hence should achieve most attention.

Longevity and fertility are traits firmly fixed within the Luing breed population in Canada evidenced by the number of cows that attained the age of twenty years in the Lochend herd.

Another way that Luing cattle can lower your production costs is the purchase price of the genetics. The original intent of the breed's founders was to produce cattle for the commercial cattleman. To maintain that focus, competitive showing of the cattle was prohibited by the Luing Society in Scotland. The Canadian Luing Society adopted the same restriction on competitive showing and this has attracted a different kind of purebred breeder to the Luing fold. The breeders are more closely tied to commercial cattle pricing structures and are more likely to sell you a bull priced relative to its production cost rather than the financially speculative pricing often associated with the mainstream show ring/purebred sector.

What does social licence have to do with raising cattle?

Glenn Webber

As it turns out a lot. The conclusion from a recent report from a British think tank was for consumers to quit eating beef as an action to address climate change. While it would be easy to write this off as some nonsense coming from some out of touch activists from Europe, this is but one example of how a thing called social licence has and will continue to affect beef producers and the industry.

So what is this thing called social licence and should we be concerned? While there does not seem to be one overriding definition, social licence can refer to the level of public trust or support granted to an industry by its key consumer base and the larger community. For the beef industry support equates to the continued purchase of beef. Social licence is applicable to three key areas of the beef industry; Animal Care, Animal Health and Production and the Environment.

Social licence is an outcome of the increasing urbanization of the world, a loss of trust by consumers in agriculture generally and the availability and impact of internet based online information. Many consumers have little knowledge or experience with agriculture. A 2012 Ipsos Reid survey on Canadian attitudes towards food and farming found 47% surveyed know very little or nothing of farming and 45% know a little about farming. There is a real risk of consumers of beef could be influenced to buy less beef by misleading or incorrect information.

The impact and profile of social licence has been more visible the past few years in the areas of Animal Care and Animal Health and Production. The use of hidden cameras by animal rights organizations and then distributed on the internet has highlighted problems, sparked public outrage and resulted in consumers boycotting some elements of the agricultural industry. The ongoing debate on the use of growth hormones and antibiotics in beef production is a current example of how social licence can result in challenges to long accepted and approved production practices. Responding to consumer concerns by saying “scientific research says it is safe” is becoming a questionable approach. There have already been too many examples where previously "safe" practices have been found to be unsafe through further research.

Social licence also represents a shift from a world where approval to operate came in the form of meeting government legislation and regulations and industry standards to one where the more of the approval rests with consumers and non-government organizations. The beef industry is increasingly under scrutiny for the resources used in the production of beef and on the impact this has on the environment. And this attention, and at times criticism, is coming from consumers and non-government organizations. A good example of this shift is the significant efforts of the fast food giants McDonalds Corporation to produce a Corporate Social Responsibility & Sustainability Framework. While there is no legislated requirement to produce and report on their framework, they recognize the importance a social licence will have on their ability to do business in the future.

Campaigns aimed at reducing the consumption of beef have the potential to have significant negative effects on the beef industry. They are targeting consumers with limited knowledge or experience with the beef industry. They are also attempting to influence politicians and organizations like the United Nations. Many consumers will not have the knowledge or context to challenge the campaigns conclusions that eating beef is part of the climate change problem. Reduced beef consumption on the basis of misleading or incomplete information would be unfortunate. Countering these kinds of challenges to the legitimacy of the beef industry is going to take a concerted effort to counteract. It will need to involve people and organizations at all levels from the cow calf producer to the end retailers.

Cattle organizations in Canada are taking steps to address this new reality. My only hope is they recognize this is more than a public relations exercise and truly learn to listen and respond the needs of consumers.

The Rest of the Story?

Glenn Webber

I may be dating myself here, but I remember a long standing radio program hosted by Paul Harvey. His approach was to tell stories while holding back important information on who or what was involved till near the end of the broadcast. Once the full story was revealed he would end the show with the line “And now you know the rest of the story.” Along the same lines it seems the cattle industry would benefit from the whole story being told when it comes to describing the overall environmental footprint of cattle.

The cattle industry is increasingly being subjected to criticism for the amount of resources used in the production of beef.

One of the key complaints is the large amount of water consumed by cattle, the amounts used for irrigation and in the processing of beef. Other complaints are based on the non-renewable energy used for fertilizer and the petroleum used for fuel for tractors and trucks all the way up the supply chain. The large amount of agricultural cropland used to raise feed for cattle is viewed as land that could be better used to raise human food crops. A common thread of the studies and criticisms are the substantially lower resources required to produce pork and chicken.

In the Internet age, the criticisms of the beef industry are often reported on by the major news outlets and end up being widely distributed and referenced. Especially those criticisms where beef production is negatively linked to climate change.

The calculations by critics of the beef industry do not present the full picture of the environmental footprint of cattle. I have yet to see any of the studies recognize or mention the positive impacts cattle have. They also fail to recognize that pork and chicken, beef’s main competitors for consumers’ protein dollars have no positive environmental impacts.

The often-overlooked positives of beef include:

- A lot of land used for beef production is unsuitable for cereal crop production or other foods directly consumed by humans. Cattle grazed on marginal land is additional food for humans that would otherwise not be available
- Well managed grasslands sequester (capture) and store large amounts of carbon. Grazing by cattle is an integral part of the process.
- Cattle have replaced the bison and elk as the primary grazers on the grasslands of North America. These grasslands are dependent on being grazed and if grazing does not occur there will be negative ecological consequences.

Luing cattle are well suited to contribute to the positive environmental impacts of beef production.

- Their ability to utilize poor quality forage is an asset for the use of marginal lands.
- Their hardiness and winter coat lowers the amount of yearly feed required and a smaller environmental footprint per cow.
- They have the potential to be finished on forage alone. This effectively reduces the criticism of the amounts of water, energy and cropland that could be used to produce human food.

There is a growing demand for grass fed beef in Canada. Currently this demand is created by consumers looking for a combination of the health benefits of grass fed beef and the opportunity to purchase and support locally grown food. Some consumers actually seek out grass fed beef on the basis of the reduced environmental footprint. Even the most vocal critics of the beef industry should acknowledge cattle raised on forage alone use less should resources and have less environmental impacts than cattle finished on cereal crops. Luing cattle and genetics have the potential to be used by producers who want to raise and sell grass fed beef to meet the demand. And they could also contribute to presenting a more positive image of the cattle industry in terms of its environmental footprint.

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

c/o Mr. Iain Aitken (Secretary/Treasurer)
Box 130, Belmont, MB, R0K 0K0
Phone: (204) 537-2620
Email: iaineaitken@gmail.com
URL: www.luingcattle.com

Directors of the Association
President Mr. Glenn Webber (403) 968-8796
Vice President Mr. Paul Galbraith (250) 346-3100
Mr. Wilf Chelle (250) 772-5607
Mr. Jeff Longard (780) 682-3805