

# Canadian Luing Cattle Association Newsletter



Vol.18, No.1  
January 2024

## Message From The Secretary

*Iain Aitken*

Welcome to our 2024 Winter Newsletter. Although most of the country seems to be enjoying a milder winter than normal the short, but extremely cold spell that gripped parts of Western Canada in January was a reminder that we need cattle with a good winter coat in this environment!

Nearly all our bulls in 2023 sold to repeat customers across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Ontario. We would however like to extend a warm welcome to the Luing world to the following customers who purchased Luing genetics for the first time in 2023:

Curtis Cauley, Belle Plaine, Minnesota  
Evan Wiersma, Elm Creek, Manitoba  
Linda Stovin, Deloraine, Manitoba

## Luings Currently for Sale

A good selection of rising 2 year old bulls from the Medicine River and Greywood Luing herds. Located Belmont, Manitoba.

Trucking across Canada can be arranged and bulls can also be tested for export to the USA. Luing semen also available, please see our website [www.luingcattle.com](http://www.luingcattle.com) or contact me for further information.

## Profitability in the Cowherd

*By Iain Aitken*

While 2023 was a most welcome year for cattle producers due to the record high prices set in the second half of the year we probably shouldn't get too comfortable with them. If history is to be our guide these prices will likely not become the new normal. In the short term we should probably refrain from lavish spending, particularly on items like new trucks or tractors. Over the longer term we need to remember the strategies that helped the remaining ranchers survive the last two decades of predominantly poor margins since BSE in 2003. In my opinion the three most important strategies were tight cost control, efficient utilization of our forage resources and a cow of the correct biological type adapted to our environment.

In our environment, and in almost every other, the most efficient cow is proven to be medium framed and weighing between 1100lb-1200lbs (500-550kgs) mature. It's not a coincidence that these were exactly the breed standards set by the Cadzow Brothers in the 1970s for the Luing in Scotland. When you breed cattle in a manner that involves them largely sustaining themselves upon the natural resources of a given environment this places a finite limit on the mature size and growth achievable. We now live in an era where many cattle, particularly purebreds, are provided with an



artificial environment where there is no limitation on inputs and as a result no limit on the size and growth that can be achieved. Today we can find some cows in most breeds maturing at 2200lbs (1000kgs) which may look impressive in the fantasy world of the show ring but are of no practical use either on the plains or prairies of North America or the hills of Scotland.

The danger with these high input, monster genetics is that they don't remain in the show circuit but percolate into commercial cattle herds and evidence of that is increasingly widespread. I noticed a lot of commercial bred heifers sold last fall weighing over 1200lbs (545kgs) and some well over 1300lbs (590kgs). These heifers have a long way to go to reach their mature weight as they would be around 18 months old at time of sale, due to calve down as two year olds in the Spring. Many had the potential to mature at 1600lb+ (725kgs+)

In North America ever increasing cow size is partly a product of the shrinking cow herd. Although cow numbers have dwindled, beef production has remained almost unchanged over the years largely due to increased slaughter weights of fat cattle. In recent months the Canadian average steer carcass weight was around 970lbs (440kgs) If we look back to the 1980s the average Canadian steer carcass weight was only 674lbs! (306kgs) I don't really understand what is driving this demand for increased size at the feedlot and packer level - but assume there must be operational efficiencies that can be gained by the larger carcass at the packing plant or by putting the same gain onto two steers instead of three at the feedlot. My own experience with direct marketing grass-fed beef tells me that this type of customer prefers the size of cuts that come off a carcass weighing under 660lbs (300kgs).



Regardless of the reasons I think as ranchers we have to be wary of being led towards producing specialist feedlot cattle whose traits are antagonistic to range or pasture production. Selection for improved

carcass conformation is generally antagonistic to fertility. Selection for low back-fat has a negative impact on the range cow's ability to hold body condition in a drought or over winter in either a cold or wet climate.

I know the old saying that "the customer is always right" but you've also got to assess whether that customer is worth catering to if their demands risk the economic future of your own business.

I think it's worth taking a step back in time and looking at the evolution of modern cattle breeding systems. In the UK, and in North America after the era of the Texas Longhorn ended, the base of beef production was all British breeds - with the Hereford, Shorthorn and Angus numerically most popular. This all changed in the 1960s when cattlemen started to import the Continental European breeds which offered the advantage of increased size and growth at a time when the British breeds had probably got too small. This first cross with bulls like Charolais or Simmental on the British breeds resulted in a tremendous increase in weaning weights and production per cow if the calving difficulties could be overcome. Somehow in the intervening decades many cattlemen seem to have forgotten the benefits achieved by crossing these two differing biological types which could loosely be described as maternal and terminal. There has also been a blurring of the lines between purebred breeds both in

terms of type and performance over the decades. Many of the British breed cattle have been selected to have the growth and size of the early Continental cattle so now we no longer have the smaller, pasture efficient type cow to use the exotic bull on.

Data from the US Meat Animal Research Centre in Nebraska indicates that the Angus breed now has the heaviest cows followed by Charolais, then Hereford, Simmental, Red Angus and Shorthorn respectively with only 130lbs (60kgs) between heaviest and lightest.

So we now find ourselves in a situation where most of the purebred cattle are of a similar size and type regardless of original breed characteristics. This denies the commercial cattlemen the opportunity to benefit from breed complementarity that could formerly be achieved by mating two different, but complimentary types to each other. The most successful examples of which would be the BlueGrey (White Shorthorn x Galloway) in the UK or the Red/Black Baldie (Horned Hereford x Angus) in North America.

This has been a real step backwards in my opinion as the most efficient breeding model for commercial beef production has always been a two way cross of British breeds to produce the F1 cow. Maximum efficiency through the harnessing of hybrid vigor is then achieved by mating these F1 cows to a terminal sire breed like

Charolais. I think we need to get back to these simple but effective cross breeding systems that deliver enough production efficiency to keep the rancher in business and still provide a very good product for the feedlot and ultimate beef consumer. Maintaining a herd of cows that are an appropriate size and adapted to their environment



*“A heifer calf of the right type”*

and the feed resources available should be the starting point. Breeding a proportion of these cows to similar types would create a set of F1 replacement heifers whose steer brothers would be suitable for grass fattening or as short fed animals in the feedlot producing lighter carcasses. The remainder of the herd could be bred directly to bulls with proper terminal sire characteristics with both steers and heifers heading to the feedlot. I have always felt the role for Luing cows is to be a maternal component part of an efficient cross breeding program as outlined above. In these thoughts I am also guided by the wisdom of Denis

Cadzow, one of the Luing breed founders, who stated in 1973:

*"The biggest scarcity in beef production lies not in the terminal bulls, but in finding suitable mates to give these bulls. We can do it, whether with a pure cow or a crossbred Luing. This is the place our breed has booked on the assembly line, and they will be ready to do their job efficiently."*

## **The Future of Animal Agriculture in Canada**

*By Iain Aitken*

As cattle producers I'm sure we are all thoroughly tired of the endless barrage of unjust criticism we face for keeping a species that is claimed to be destroying the planet through their methane emissions. I was therefore very happy to come across a report by CAPI (The Canadian Agri-Food Policy Institute) entitled "Forces Impacting Animal Agriculture in Canada: A Synthesis". The report is based on an extensive 150 page white paper commissioned by the organisation. It presents a more thoughtful analysis which validated some of my own opinions regarding climate change and agriculture.

A good starting point would be their statement that animal agriculture currently accounts for only 5% of total emissions in Canada. This includes beef and dairy cattle, pigs, poultry, sheep, goats and farmed bison. The report points out that reducing or even eliminating livestock production in

Canada completely would have minimal impact on reaching domestic emission reduction targets. I personally don't think 5% is a high level given that we are talking about a major food source for domestic and export consumption. I feel there are whole sectors of society that are overlooked when quantifying emission sources. For example, have you ever heard a politician suggest reigning in the emissions created by the use of recreational vehicles ranging from skidoos to motorhomes, power boats to airplanes? I'm sure the total emissions these produce must be considerable and absolutely none of them are essential, unlike food.

The report goes on to highlight that as the world population continues to grow so does the demand for animal protein. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently projected that global per capita consumption of calories from animal products will increase by 29% by 2050 compared with a 2011 baseline, given a projected global population of 10 billion people.

Perhaps the most enlightening part of the report is the evidence presented that Canadian emissions from animal agriculture are some of the lowest in the world. Their data expresses this as kilograms of carbon dioxide emissions per kilogram of beef protein produced as follows: North America 109.93kgs compared to Western Europe at 152.02kgs, Australia/New Zealand at

157.63kgs and South America at a whopping 365kgs!

The report finds that Canada's abundance of natural resources allow for this low emission animal protein production efficiency. Our extensive pasture and grasslands not only produce animal protein they also harbour significant wildlife habitat, support biodiversity and store significant amounts of carbon. A low cost supply of animal feed that includes downgraded grains and



feedstuffs, rendered products, food waste, and crop residue complement the forage land base for efficient production. In the process, farm animals up-cycle inedible feedstuffs that are less nutrient dense into edible, more nutrient dense, and more digestible food products, containing nutrients inaccessible from other sources.

Combining the fact that the world demand for animal protein is increasing and that Canadian emissions involved in that protein production are among the lowest in

the world, the report comes to the logical conclusion that we should be expanding our production here at this moment, not contracting it.

Unfortunately due to low market returns over the last two decades the Canadian beef herd has shrunk considerably. The danger of allowing this decline to continue is that more pasture and hay land will be torn up to grow annual crops, releasing a lot of stored carbon in the process. The other danger is that if our domestic beef production declines we will be increasingly reliant on imports of beef from countries with higher emission production systems which would only increase total global CO2 emissions at a time we are trying to reduce them.

This is part of a bigger problem that politicians everywhere seem to be missing - when they design climate mitigation strategies on a country by country basis they lack a holistic context. When you decide to subsidise tree planting on good pasture land in New Zealand or Scotland you are just displacing that production and moving it elsewhere, not eliminating the need for production. As the wealthiest countries with the most vocal electorates seek to reduce, or eliminate animal agriculture, that production is often moved to areas of the world that are politically and climatically more precarious which is a real threat to global food security.

The report contains much more information than I have discussed here and I would encourage you to take the time to read it yourself as I

feel it is an excellent resource. Perhaps armed with this type of information and insight we have a better chance of influencing politicians and the wider population that our

animals aren't the thing that is destroying our planet? The report can be found at: <https://capi-icpa.ca/explore/resources/forces-impacting-animal-agriculture-in-canada-a-synthesis/>

## **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](mailto:iaineaitken@gmail.com)  
URL: [www.luingcattle.com](http://www.luingcattle.com)

Directors of the Association:  
President Mr. Jamie Dick (306) 277-2077  
Vice President Mr. Glenn Webber (403) 968-8796  
Mr. Grant Lastiwka (403) 350-6394  
Mr. Jeff Longard (780) 682-380

