CANADIAN LUING
Cattle Association

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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT *Jeff Longard*

Luing are the Best... For What?

In the 21st century world of cattle breeding, the primary idea of "breed" seems to have been lost. Originally, a breed was a race of animals within a species that had developed or was selected for certain identifiable and heritable traits. So shaggy Galloways produced beef against Scotland's cold wet winds, while massive Continentals pulled ploughs in the pleasant valleys of France and Switzerland, and little fawn-coloured darlings gave the richest milk on the mineral-poor soils of Jersey and Alderney.

Now, however, the purpose of a breed – any breed – of beef cattle seems to be to grow like a Charolais, muscle like a Limousin and milk like a Holstein – and to do it all while wearing the disguise of a solid red or black coat. And if breed associations can get there while still promoting the half-century old myth that their cattle are moderate, maternal, and efficient, well then, they're sitting on top! Jim Lents, arguably the most important Hereford breeder alive, said that today's beef breed associations "all encourage massive use of artificial insemination (AI) to the latest in curve-bending bulls and tout the resulting changes as 'genetic progress.' Unfortunately this practice is diametrically opposed to the actual purpose of a breed, which is to be a genetically stable population that does certain things very well. Few if any of today's breed association officials understand this aspect at all."

So I'm going to do something that perhaps no other breed society would do: I'm going to tell you not only the advantages of Luing cattle but their disadvantages as well. Because one thing that I have always admired about the Canadian Luing is that it has remained a true Breed, which means it has certain predictable adaptations making it the first and only choice in some environments and programs, and second or third or last choice in others. Here goes!

ADVANTAGES OF THE LUING

- exceptional foraging ability and able to thrive on coarse feed
- able to finish on either grass or grain
- excellent maternal characteristics
- longevity – cows are expected to raise 12 or more calves, and 20-year-old producing cows are not unusual
- outstanding fertility
- hardy and fully winterized; heavy-coated; no pampering required
- easily handled
- moderate size, inexpensive feeders, efficient feed converters
- easy calvers to virtually any breed – no Caesarians in the entire breed history!
- exceptional mothers: Luing cows typically wean 50% of their own bodyweight
- efficient producers of top quality marbled meat suitable for any market but especially organic or holistic meat businesses

DISADVANTAGES OF THE LUING

- *not* suited to warm climates
- heavy hair coat in winter which some markets may discount
- a small percentage of Canadian Luings are horned and a larger percentage may carry horn genes, which some cattlemen find troublesome

- colour is most often solid red, but roans, yellows and (rarely) whites do occur. There are no black Luings. In Canadian cattle markets, red and black are the current fashion, and other colours may be discounted in some markets. Currently, about half of Canadian Luing breeders favour solid red while the others do not select for colour.

- Moderately fast growth characteristcs – not extremely fast. Although the breeding vigour, fertility and productivity of Luing bulls make them an excellent choice on any type of herd, our experience is that Luing bulls on crossbred cows will produce weaned calves about 20 lbs lighter than Charolais bulls on identical cows under identical management. (The Canadian Luing is really about the economic value of reliable function, efficient reproduction, longevity, low inputs, and the production of first-class herd replacements; it was never selected for terminal characteristics.)

So there you have it. If you live in a typically warm climate, or on extremely productive soils where high-quality feeds are cheap, if you breed only terminal calves, or if you are addicted to your massive cows and are not planning to breed or buy moderate replacements, Luing are probably not for you. If on the other hand your environment resembles mine – cold for many months of the year, strong rough soils which produce good rough grazing, high cost of buying and transporting feed, especially high-quality feed – then it's time to consider a *breed* selected for this particular environment. ▣

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

Iain Aitken

In response to higher grain and lower cattle prices it seems more and more bull sale catalogues and magazine adverts are touting their cattle as being "low maintenance, efficient foragers." Now this would be great if it were true, but closer inspection often reveals their bulls have 200 day weaning weights of 750-800lbs and 365 day weights upwards of 1500lbs. I very much doubt that weight gains of this magnitude can be achieved on forage; more likely they are "harvesting" grain out of a feedbunk. If buyers are tempted to try cattle falsely claimed to have forage efficiency traits they might be disappointed. This disappointment could turn into a prejudice against all breeds claiming to be efficient foragers. This would be unfortunate for a breed like the Luing that was created specifically to be a low maintenance, efficient forager. Of course, just buying a Luing bull won't guarantee your cattle are efficient foragers for eternity – there must be ongoing selection under appropriate conditions to maintain the desired traits. I don't doubt that over a few generations Luings given hot-house feeding and selected to compete in the show ring could turn into oversized grain burners that don't forage well.

Every farm or ranch has different conditions and it is appropriate that the owner select cattle that suit the land and resources available to them. In the following article I will outline the system we use on our operation and why we find Luings are an ideal choice of cow for our system. Our property is in a relatively high precipitation (over 20 inches) area of west Central Alberta that tends to get a fairly deep snow cover that lasts all winter. We are situated in

a valley that gets severe late and early frosts and on soil that is predominantly a black, silt parkland type. It is good grass country but only marginal grain land, and as a result the surrounding area tends to have an oversupply of forage (cereal silage, hay and straw) for sale at below average prices. We believe that the key to maximizing profit on our operation is the elimination of as much fuel and machinery as possible and allowing the cattle to harvest their own feed. The key to our system is the use of deferred (banked) perennial pasture which allows us to winter feed for only 100 days in an area where 200+ days winter feeding is the norm. We can usually buy our winter feed for less than $1 per day per cow excluding minerals and salt. Our annual tractor fuel bill is less than $5 per animal wintered which covers dispensing the winter feed, harrowing wintering fields, moving water troughs in summer and a multitude of other small tasks.

Driving around the countryside it seems there are still a lot more overgrazed pastures than managed ones. It appears that if you leave the cows to make the grazing management decisions they will prove to be short term thinkers! Given the chance they will always overgraze and will run out of grass in August. It used to surprise me that cows on overgrazed pastures tended to be fatter in July than mine but it seems that because the plants are grazed so short the quality remains very high. The down side of this is that these cattle have to be fed for increasingly long winters as pasture output always decreases over time under an unmanaged grazing system.

In contrast, our system produces a high volume of forage, but this means that at times we compromise grass quality – which is where cattle that are efficient foragers become essential. With the use of a grazing plan and electric fencing we can usually manipulate our pastures to provide the herd with adequate nutrition for all stages of their production cycle, but to do so the production cycle must be reasonably in tune with nature. Our grazing year begins by putting cows onto banked perennial pastures as soon as the winter snow cover is gone – usually in the first week of April – and they start calving around the middle of the month. This gives calves an ideal start with a dry bed of old grass, and the cows don't require feeding which minimizes disruption to them when they are calving. We never need to treat scours and we have very few cows that require any attention at calving. Around mid-May the cows will usually move onto fresh green grass and be rotated very quickly over almost the entire farm with the simple aim of delaying grass maturity through this rapid growth period. We reckon that at least half of the year's grass is grown between mid May and the first of July in this area so grass management is critical at this time of year. If the grass gets ahead of us and starts maturing we lose a lot of potential yield as once the seed heads form many of the plants stop actively growing for the year. At the same time we have to resist the temptation to graze each field to a perfect level as doing this usually means slowing the rotation too much, which allows fields later in the sequence to mature before we get to them. Normally, none of our pastures are grazed more than twice a year, some are grazed only once, but we alternate the sequence in which fields are grazed each year to maintain a healthy diversity of plant species. A proportion of the farm is allowed to mature and set seed each year to enable natural reseeding. As we move through late June we graze the fields that will then be banked for grazing the following spring. They need to be

Non-forage-type cows cannot thrive on this system

grazed once, late in the fast growth period, to ensure the re-growth is of sufficient quality to sustain the newly calved cows when they graze it nine months later.

Once the bulls are turned out around July 10th we lose some grazing efficiency as the herd must be split up into different breeding groups. The cows continue to graze rotationally but we start to slow down their forward moves and stock them much heavier per acre to get almost a complete utilization of the grass, as these pastures will not be grazed again until the following summer. After the bulls are pulled in early September we are able to combine all the herds again and benefit from the extra animal impact this creates. We wean the calves at 5-6 months old, around the middle of October, and find early weaning serves two purposes: it allows calves to be fence-line weaned onto a high quality pasture while the weather is still reasonably warm, which almost eliminates weaning stress and the health problems it can create; and it also allows the cows to be fattened up before winter while their nutritional needs are at their lowest. We continue to rotationally graze the weaned cows until we run out of grass or get snow too deep to graze through. This normally takes us through to late December at which point we start feeding the cows.

As we usually have a ready supply of feed in our locality we prefer to buy our feed rather than use our own land to grow it. This has the added benefit of importing a lot of fertility and ultimately organic material onto our land. Last winter, after the exceptional growing season in 2007, we had a lot of coarse, rank timothy left on one quarter so we limit fed the cows on cereal silage and made them clean up this grass through to the end of January. In a more typical year we would start the cows on a half silage, half straw ration and move that up to a two thirds silage, one third straw ration in February. We feel straw is a much under used component of most winter feed programs because there are simply not enough of the type of cows that can utilize it.

Selecting the right cows for the system is simple – look for the deep, well-fleshed ones that are thriving!

This is the system we have set up on our operation as we feel it is the lowest cost model available in our circumstances. Now as far as selecting cattle that will suit the system, it is fairly easy – I go out in the late afternoon in December when they are harvesting low quality forage and look for the ones that are absolutely round like barrels. These are the cattle with foraging and fleshing ability that excel on the system. This is a far simpler and more appropriate guide to identify foragers than testing young bulls for net feed efficiency in a feedlot on a grain ration. When I go around in late April and the cows are rearing calves on banked grass I notice the ones that are still round and full usually don't have excessive milk – these are the cattle that are low maintenance, efficient foragers. We find the heaviest milkers nearly always calf in the second cycle or they turn up open after our seven week breeding program. It is often said that smaller cows are lower maintenance and should prosper in systems like ours, but I think that cow type is more important than actual cow size. We have some large cows that maintain condition well, but I know by their calf weaning weights that it is at the expense of their milk output, so they aren't very efficient. On the other hand we have some small cows that milk too much and don't carry enough condition. They wean heavy calves that are a high percentage of their dam's weight but they usually turn up open before they are very old. The cows that do well on our system are short, thick, stocky, cows – tall cows or cows with overly long bodies can't handle our system.

Although we always planned on setting up a

Luing herd, we stocked the farm initially with a number of different breeds bought at auction. As our grazing system has evolved, we can honestly say that the Luings are the breed that seem best adapted to what we are doing here. The genetics that absolutely didn't work on our system came from some of the highest profile bull breeders in Alberta. Buying bulls selected for growth and feedlot efficiency but marketed as "maternal" cattle produced disastrous results in our herd.

One thing I should point out about our system is that it is too tough for first and some second calf cows. We feed these separately, and slightly better, from early winter through to hitting the green grass in May. They do not seem able to derive enough energy from a straw-diluted ration in winter or from banked grass in the spring to meet their maintenance and production requirements as well as continuing to grow. I suspect the stage of growth their teeth are at may impact their ability to graze tough feed successfully. We also pull out a few thinner mature cows for extra feed each winter but these are often older cows on the way out of the herd anyway. On that point I'd like to bring this diatribe full circle by including a piece of cattle selection policy gleaned from the Cadzow brothers' experiences whilst developing the Luing breed in Scotland. Like everyone else running cattle under tough commercial conditions they had some lean cows in the winter which required extra feeding in a separate group. Where their policy differed from most commercial cattlemen (and any purebred breeders that I know of) was that if any cow needed extra feeding two winters running she, along with any offspring, were culled from the herd. Given the almost unique situation of the Luing breed's development being controlled by one family, this set the breed on a sound footing as one that could be described as low maintenance, efficient foragers. I know of no other breed that can truly claim to have had such traits deliberately bred in from the outset. ▣

The 2008 Annual General Meeting

of the

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

will be hosted by the Longards at Greywood Luings, Winfield, Alberta, August 15-16, together with the Aitken's at Medicine River Luings, Blacketlees Farm, Rimbey, Alberta. Join us Friday evening for supper and a time of fellowship. Saturday morning's breakfast will be followed by a tour of the cattle at Blacketlees, dinner at noon and the business meeting at 1:30 pm. We look forward to seeing all of our members as well as those interested in learning more about Luing cattle. Please give Jeff and Loretta a call if you are planning to attend so we can prepare for the right number. Also, let us know if you will be able to make it for Friday and would like a place to stay – we'd love to have you (780-682-3805); Iain and Rowena have also opened their home so there will be room for everyone (403-843-0094). Participation in the business meeting is, of course, for members only, but as the meeting is generally both short and informative, all are invited to sit in and enjoy. See you there!

the Canadian Luing Cattle Association

c/o Mr Iain Aitken • Blacketlees Farm • Rural Route 4 • Rimbey, Alberta
T0C 2J0
Phone/Fax: (403) 843-0094 • www.luingcattle.com

Officers of the Association:

President: Mr Jeff Longard
Vice-President: Mr Paul Galbraith
Secretary/Treasurer: Mr Iain Aitken
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