Message From The Secretary

Iain Aitken

Welcome to our 2026 Winter Newsletter. “What a great time to be in the cattle business” I said last January and looking back it’s hard to believe how much higher prices for all categories of stock have gone since then! I hope everyone is enjoying this period of prosperity, which maybe comes only once in a lifetime. It seems like an opportunity to prepare for leaner times in the future by reinvesting in our ranches or paying down debt.

I have performed a major overhaul on my website so if you haven’t visited it in a while please head over to www.luingcattle.com to view the new content and pictures.

Many thanks to our repeat customers across Canada who purchased bulls last year and also to the following customers who purchased Luing genetics for the first time in 2025:

Carman Marzoff, Inglis, MB
White Owl Farm, Canora, SK
Roger Smith, Elk Point, AB
Thomas Weir, North Battleford, SK

Luings Currently for Sale

A good selection of rising 2 year old bulls are available 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 or contact me for further information.

“Big” Problems Brewing For The Cattle Industry?

By Iain Aitken

Despite great cattle prices in recent years all the rancher’s challenges haven’t gone away overnight. There is one particularly “big” problem brewing - that of oversized cattle. A combination of genetics and market dynamics led to the heaviest average carcass weights ever recorded in the USA at 983lbs in November, with Canada not far behind. Unfortunately, at the same time, the cows in the national herd are also getting bigger than ever before. It seems most bred heifers being marketed in Western Canada last Fall were in the 1200lb to 1400lb range, but I’ve even seen some at over 1600lbs! Conventional wisdom suggests that heifers should reach 65% of mature weight at breeding and 85% of mature weight by the time they calve at two years old. Most heifers sold in November will be approximately halfway between breeding and calving so they should be around 75% of mature weight. This would indicate that the 1200lb to 1400lb heifers will likely mature at between 1600lb and 1850lbs. For the sake of this exercise let's say they will mature on average at 1700lbs.

Judging by social media posts and breeder advertisements a common claim is that their calves regularly wean off at 50% of their dams weight. For a 1200lb cow to wean a 600lb calf it would necessitate a daily live weight gain of 2.51lb/day, after allowing for an 84lb birth weight. By contrast for a 1700lb cow to wean 50% of her weight (850lb) would require a daily live weight gain of 3.6lbs/day after allowing for a 110lb birth weight.

Research has shown that typical calf weight gains on grass and milk are 2lb to 2.5lb/day with only exceptional forage resulting in gains of more than 2.25lb/day. Given that evidence it seems clear that most calves weaned are not weighing 50% of their dam’s weight. Some ranchers, and most purebred breeders will creep feed their calves every year to increase weaning weights. However, as creep feeding only adds 0.25lb/day to 0.4lb/day to overall gains it does not have the ability to deliver 3.6/lb/day gain in calves. A more likely explanation is that some calves have their weaning weights recorded at much older than the generally accepted age of 205 days. I imagine this is probably the case with early calving herds

(January/February) which often seem to wean in October along with everybody else when the grass runs out.

Figures contained in the recent "Canadian Cow-Calf Adoption Rates and Performance Report" by Canfax indicate that cows in Western Canada are actually weaning 38-41% of the dam's weight, and that these percentages are declining. When we consider that 70% of the dietary energy used in beef production goes to maintenance of the cow herd, increasing cow size while weaning calves that are a smaller percentage of the mother's weight is a recipe for financial disaster when we return to a lower cattle price/higher feed price environment. This problem will only get worse as the size of heifers entering the national herd continues to increase.

The large cows create two economic challenges that directly reduce the overall profitability of cow calf producers. One is that when these cows are out on pasture, they consume much more forage compared to a smaller cow. Range that provides capacity for a hundred 1200lb cows will only support seventy 1700lb cows. That means having 30 less calves to sell every year, albeit they should be heavier calves.

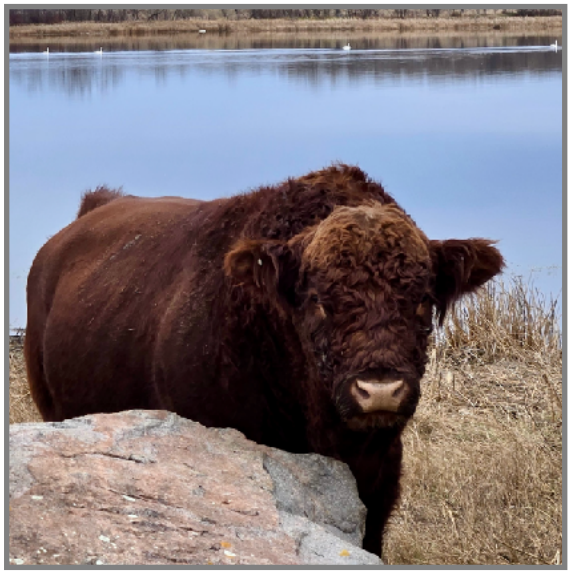
The second problem is the substantial increase in the cost of feeding the cows over winter. Using our own current rations our 1200lb mature Luing cows are costing $1.66/ day actual feed cost and allowing for wastage. Using simple math this puts the comparative cost for a 1700lb cow to at least $2.37/day on the same feeds. There is a possibility that the bigger cow would not only need more of this feed but might also require a higher quality diet which would further increase costs. In Manitoba we have relatively low feed costs compared to many other areas. If you live in an area where hay costs 10 cents a pound versus 6 cents a pound you can see how quickly feed costs will escalate. It is not a stretch to say that 1700lb cows will easily eat over $4/ day of forage at these higher prices. Bear in mind this is only the cost of the feed - it does not include the cost of actually delivering the feed to the animals and all the other yardage costs.

There may be other implications of supporting a much larger cow type. Will larger cattle create more calving difficulties? Will they be able to breed back on drought stricken pastures with their higher feed requirements?

While not a true “apples to apples” comparison I found the production records of the Cadzow Luing herd in Scotland in 1975 very interesting. They recorded a 3.8% open rate on the herd, 1.3% assisted calving rate and 90% calves weaned per hundred cows exposed. These were whole-herd figures so would include the first calf heifers which at that time were bred down to calve at three years old.

In contrast the statistics contained in the previously mentioned Canfax Report for Manitoba in 2023 show a 10% open cow rate, 4.5% assisted calving rate and 84.5% calves weaned per hundred cows exposed. These figures exclude first calf heifers which are typically calved down at two years old and had a 13% open rate and 16% assisted calving rate. Average mature cow weights in the survey were well over 1500lbs. As I said I don’t think we can make a direct comparison here as these are two very different environments. In the first case the cattle were all Luing in one herd while in the Manitoba case they would be a cross section of all breeds under various management conditions. It does seem disappointing though that despite all the advancements in animal husbandry, disease prevention and nutrition over the last fifty years we are not achieving better results now than we were back then.

Over the last couple of years while cattle have been selling at previously unimagined highs I have heard countless cow/calf producers in North America and in the United Kingdom (UK) say that their input costs are still rising faster than cattle prices. While we may have little control over the price of inputs like electricity or tractor parts we do have the ability to control size and efficiency of the cows in our herds. Maybe it’s time to do something about that while we are still enjoying an unprecedented period of prosperity?



The obvious solution to address the negative financial effects on profitability that the trend to increasing cow size is creating is to reduce the size of the cows. I think we also need to consider what genetic progress really is - it certainly isn’t making cattle constantly bigger through providing unlimited and unmeasured inputs. That process doesn’t consider efficiency or profitability at all yet is the production system practised by most in the purebred cattle sector. The consequence of pursuing unlimited growth in the mistaken belief that it constitutes genetic progress is

causing the proliferation of terminal cattle types in almost every breed. Growth is a terminal trait and is antagonistic to the maternal characteristics that result in a beef cow rearing a calf more efficiently.

Sadly both the breeding cattle show and sale rings are still dominated by the "bigger is better" mentality. The biggest and fattest bulls and females win the rosettes and earn the highest prices every time. This is nothing new, and is the reason Denis Cadzow decreed at the outset of the Luing breed that there was to be no showing permitted within the breed and that bulls should be sold in their natural condition, ready to go to work the day after the sale. Unfortunately, the latter rule has fallen by the wayside amongst the majority of Luing breeders in the UK but we have upheld it in Canada.

While downsizing cows industry wide would be a new challenge for the cow/calf sector we can probably take some lessons from history when we encountered the opposite problem. In the middle of the last century cattle on both sides of the Atlantic had declined in size to the point they were uneconomic. In North America this was referred to as the "belt buckle" era as the cattle in the show ring only reached up to their owners waists. In Scotland the same problem was occurring and indeed is what led the Cadzow Brothers to develop the Luing breed. They created a new breed that was a more economic size for commercial cattlemen like themselves. After the first few years of selling bulls to the wider industry they realized that they had to increase the size of their cattle still further - not because they needed bigger cattle themselves, but so that their bulls offered more of a "corrective factor" when crossed onto the overly small cattle making up the wider cow herd at that time.

To put this in context, data from the UK's Meat and Livestock Commission (MLC) for the period 1975-77 show average 400 day weights of purebred heifers as follows: Luing 704lbs, Aberdeen Angus 633lbs, Hereford 651lbs and Shorthorn 660lbs. The Luing was even further ahead of the other "hill" breeds - the Highland, Galloway and Welsh Black. It's worth remembering also that the Luing at that time had been developed and maintained on low quality west coast grazing with absolutely minimal supplementation.

Having followed the Cadzow's methodology with the Luing genetics available in Canada it is interesting to note how little our cattle have deviated from the Breed Standard set in 1974. Our yearling Luing heifers still weigh very close to that 704lb weight of fifty years ago. Our bred heifers in November averaged 925lbs which is 75% of their predicted mature weight of 1232lbs.

Just as the Luing was the “right size” cow to lead the industry in the 1970s I believe we are again uniquely positioned to counter the current genetic size challenge. We have the genetics to provide the vital corrective factor the wider cattle industry needs to downsize their cows. Are you prepared to challenge the “bigger is better” paradigm and introduce some smaller, more efficient, maternal Luing genetics into your herd?

Crossbreeding With Luing Bulls

Iain Aitken

In the Fall of 2023 I purchased a dozen older crossbred cows from a neighbour’s dispersal because I thought they were undervalued. Like a lot of commercial cows they are a genetic hodgepodge but probably carry at least Red Angus, Simmental and Gelbvieh genetics. When I bought them they were in-calf to Charolais or Black Gelbvieh bulls. They all calved down problem free but it was noticeable that out of such a small group they produced 5 different colours of calf! They reared their calves well and when we weighed them a few weeks after weaning they averaged 656lbs at 247 days of age.
In 2025 these cows calved down to a Luing bull, again trouble free, but this time all had dark red calves. When we weighed them a few weeks after weaning this year they averaged 650lbs at 225 days of age. This was a pleasant surprise and indicates the Luing sired calves probably had a 50lb weight advantage if corrected to the same age at weighing.

Luing x calf from one of the old crossbred cows.

My conclusion is that using the line-bred Luing genetics on randomly crossbred cows created considerably more heterosis (hybrid vigor) compared to the previous sires used. The fact that Luings are totally unrelated to almost anything in the wider crossbred cow population would certainly contribute to this boost in heterosis. Although we gained a weaning weight advantage in this instance I would still expect that any heifers retained from these matings would mature at least a frame score and 100lbs - 200lbs lighter than their 1400lb mothers. The uniformity of the Luing x calf crop is notable and they would be very saleable through any commodity channel. I think this demonstrates a good way to use Luing genetics to downsize a crossbred cowherd while improving efficiency and uniformity of type.

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

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