

# CANADIAN LUING

## Cattle Association

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NEWSLETTER

January 2013

### MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

*Iain Aitken*

Happy New Year and welcome to our January 2013 Luing newsletter.

As we are no longer holding a breed association bull rearing program on my farm we have decided not to feature individual bull pictures in this edition. For bio-security reasons we felt it prudent to close our herd to outside cattle movements. We are, however, continuing to rear and sell bulls at Medicine River Luings but they will only be from my own herd, Jeff Longard's Greywood herd (which are here on a custom feeding basis) and Brady Merrell's Little Valley herd (which resides here under a share agreement). Other breeders may have bulls for sale from their own ranches and we encourage you to contact them directly. I will maintain a current list of registered animals for sale on behalf of all association members and will post that to our website [www.luingcattle.com](http://www.luingcattle.com) Just click on the "Luing Cattle Association" tab followed by the "Cattle for Sale" tab. Alternatively, feel free to call me at any time and I will try to find cattle to meet your requirements.

Another reason that we discontinued individual bull pictures ties in with Jeff Longard's article in this edition that reinforces the idea of "population genetics". To fulfill the true definition of the word "breed" we must have a population of cattle that consistently demonstrate the traits and

characteristics that make them unique. The best way to convey this consistency in a printed medium is maybe using group photographs. So we hope you will enjoy the pictures we have included in this issue.



*Heads down - population genetics at work*

I would like to point out to those reading the paper version that our newsletter is also available electronically in PDF format which gives you access to better quality pictures with the ability to zoom in and look in more detail. Just go to our homepage and click on the link to "January 2013 newsletter". If you would prefer to receive the newsletter electronically just send me an email at the address shown on the back page and I'll add you to my email list.

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## Why Luing bulls are reasonably priced *By Jeff Longard*

Several years ago I decided to move from the popular mainstream breed with which I was working, and to try Luings. My first contact with a Luing breeder was a call to Dr. Bob Church. He informed me that he had kept 10 yearling bulls for sale that year, that they were selling for \$1,600 each, buyer's choice, and that there were three left.

I was immediately suspicious. First of all, how could good bulls be sold so cheaply? My previous two yearling bulls had been purchased at \$4,000 and \$4,400 respectively. (Frustration with their lack of predictability and their constant economic disappointment was the reason I was looking at Luings in the first place, but I didn't think of that at the moment.) Secondly, how could all bulls be the same price -- surely there were \$10,000 wonders and \$900 bargain-basement disappointments? Finally, why would I be interested in any of the remaining three, which were obviously the culs that no one else had wanted?

Clearly, I had not had much experience with a far-sighted commitment to pure-breeding. I didn't understand that the goal of breeders such as Dr. Church was not to raise a wide range of offspring, from the runts to the curve-bending freaks, but rather to raise the largest possible grouping of essentially similar animals which express, equally and predictably, the characteristics of the breed. Anything that did not meet those criteria had already been removed from the pen before sales began. And logically if Dr. Church had equal confidence

in all of his offerings, they would all sell at the same price; individual differences would simply be a matter of buyer preference. Moreover, Dr. Church was not inviting the commercial cattleman to play the "stock market" in both senses of the term -- to speculate on the illusory possibilities of a particular animal -- but had tied his pricing to his own cost of production and to the expected return on investment in the commercial sector. How refreshing!



*Luing calves ready to wean*

As purebred breeders, I and my colleagues in the Canadian Luing Cattle Association have aimed to follow in the footsteps of Dr. Church. Granted, there is a certain logic to the auction system in which the buyer decides exactly how much he or she is willing to pay for a given product, and a certain justification for a breeder setting differentiated values on his stock based on their exceptional qualities. However, I return to the notion that pure-bred animals should not have exceptional qualities (that is, qualities that are an exception to their breed) but predictable breed integrity, and that therefore neither the breeder nor the bidder should encourage wild plunging for

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the possession of a particular individual. If we as breeders are doing our job well, virtually any of the bulls we are offering should work just fine for you, provided that a Luing bull is what your operation needs.

As the story turned out, I did not buy a bull from Dr. Church that year, because he kindly suggested that there was a breeder much closer to my area, Iain Aitken, who had a bull available. Accompanied by a cattleman friend, I went down to Iain's to take a look at the bull, a 2½ -year-old for sale at \$1800. My friend grumbled on the trip down that it had better be an impressive bull at so high a price. I liked the bull and concluded the purchase. On the way back, my friend sniffed suspiciously, "That is quite a bull... I wonder what's wrong that he's letting him go at so low a price..." It was quite a bull, it was a good price, and I have never looked back from that day to this -- it's been Luing ever since.

Another critical factor that influences pricing for most Luing breeders is a program of growing forage-raised bulls slowly. Many breeders offer two-year-olds that have been developed on a winter ration of hay and silage and a spring to fall diet of grazing. Because winter gains are moderate most growth takes place, as it should, on pasture. This not only means a very sound animal that will live and perform much longer and better than his grain-stuffed counterpart, but also greatly reduced input costs compared to the extravagant expenses of creep and feedlot gains of three to four pounds a day on grains and concentrates. These savings - the direct one in terms of input and the indirect one in terms of health,

soundness and longevity -- are passed on to the customer.

A while back, in the bad times of the Canadian cattle crisis, our offering of rising 2-year-old bulls attracted interest because of their reasonable prices. Now, after many months of rebounded income in the industry, our bulls are about the same price as they were three years ago and probably for that reason attract a bit of suspicion.



*Luing cow browsing on willow*

Everyone is suddenly anxious again to spend their short-term profits on the curve-bending freak that has almost no chance of passing his characteristics on to his offspring. But we as Luing breeders still believe in pricing our bulls according to a reasonable profit on cost of production, a rational long-term return on investment for the commercial cattleman (by long-term, I mean not based on short-term market fluctuations), and a confidence that all the animals are excellent representatives of the breed rather than flash-in-the-pan superstars or flea-market bargains.

I must be careful to emphasize that the Association in no way sets prices and that each breeder is free to charge whatever he or she wishes; it will be up to you to shop

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around for the product and the price that meet your criteria. However, it is my experience that Luing breeders tend to consult and to keep prices comparable, stable, and fair for both sides of the transaction. In times of economic challenge, those prices seem solid and reasonable. In those brief periods when the industry is euphorically optimistic, they seem suspiciously low! But after the dust settles on the ups and downs of the cattle business, we plan to still be there, and we want to do our best so that you will be too!



*Luing steers fattening on grass*

## Feed Efficiency And The Cow Herd

*By Iain Aitken*

I've been reading a lot lately about the need to test and select beef cattle for greater feed efficiency as there has been very little progress made in this area in the last half century. In contrast our competitors in the chicken and hog industries have made huge feed efficiency gains in recent decades. There are a number of researchers studying beef feed efficiency at experimental institutions and a number of seed-stock

producers already using it as a marketing tool. Young bulls are being tested for Residual Feed Intake (RFI) in a feedlot setting where their intake of feed is measured against performance with the highest gain per pound of feed consumed is deemed the most feed efficient. One test result I saw took it a generation further and compared heifers in the feedlot sired by low RFI (more feed efficient) and high RFI (less feed efficient) bulls. Over a 150 day fattening period the heifers sired by the low RFI bull reduced costs to get to the endpoint by \$16 per animal. I was interested in that research result but more interested in the comment that accompanied it - *"It is unclear how this feed efficiency is expressed in a cow herd under stressful conditions or when feed is limited"*

I think this is a case of science advancing faster than the thought process on its practical application. There is maybe also a failure to recognize the different goals, objectives and resources available to the feedlot operator and the cow/calf producer. The feedlot operator makes his living by turning grain into beef whereas the cow/calf operator makes his living by converting forage into beef. Obviously the feedlot operator has a vested interest in identifying the cattle which will be most efficient at converting grain to beef but I question the value of this information to cow/calf producers. Higher grain/oilseed prices have increased annual crop acres at the expense of grass resulting in declining cattle populations in many parts of the world. Cows are economically being forced onto poorer land which is arguably where they should have been all along. In my area the

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remaining cows are increasingly sidelined onto bush pastures, riparian areas and land too rough or uneven to crop.

I think of more relevance to cow/calf producers is identifying the cows most efficient in a grazing situation. This efficiency need not necessarily manifest itself as the cow that eats the least amount of pounds to get bred back or rear a decent calf but may instead be the one that can come off pasture latest in the fall, in the best condition being bred back and having reared a decent calf. I think the cows that do this the best are the ones that glean their maintenance requirements from as wide a range of grasses, forbs, bushes and trees as possible. I observe many pastures in my area where the cows (particularly those with exotic blood) will graze the tame grass areas into the dirt but leave the sloughs and thistle patches untouched. This un-grazed feed resource is waste just as surely as if you leave one row in six out to rot when you are baling a field of hay. Being able to harvest extra cow days per acre off each pasture because of a cow's willingness to utilize plant species other cattle wouldn't eat is pure profit. This trait was called "foraging ability" in the past but seems to be largely forgotten nowadays. In addition to having this extra free food supply there is a secondary cost saving because there is less need to spend money on sprays or mechanical control of what other ranchers consider troublesome weeds.

Fortunately foraging ability is a trait that the Luing has in abundance. I suspect this ability in the Luing came originally from their Highland ancestors who are great rustlers - as are the other big horned breed -

the Texas Longhorn. I don't think it's a coincidence that these two breeds sharing this trait are some of the least "human influenced" breeds in the cattle world. I speculate from watching our cattle graze that they have a more refined palate than most and realize consuming a wider diversity of plants leads to a more nutritionally balanced diet. I'm sure the mineral content of their diet will be different given that a lot of the bushes and tall plants our cows eat are deeper rooted and hence will be pulling minerals up from deeper soil zones than the shallow rooted grasses can access. Supplemental mineral consumption certainly increases any time I confine my grazing cows on tame pasture grown on formerly depleted farmland. In contrast the consumption drops off any time they have access to bush/slough or treed areas.



*"Feed efficiency tested" Luing cows coming off pasture January 2013*

Once you have a herd of cattle that are adapted to eating a wider range of plants the utilization of pasture really changes. This change is perhaps most notable in the summer under good growing conditions. Despite the common types of grass being

lush and abundant our cows will often be seen grazing stinging nettles, hemp nettles, sedges, thistles, willows and even slough grass to balance their diet. Luckily this foraging ability is not only transferred genetically but can be learned behavior. We have purchased cows in the past off droughted out, overgrazed tame pastures where the only un-grazed vegetation over an inch tall was thistles. A year later these same cows amongst abundant forage of all types were happily eating thistles along with their “teachers.” It seems strange but well fed cows are more inclined to start eating alternative plant species than hungry one. I have never seen cows in a bare pasture start to eat thistles of their own accord even if they are hungry. Under tough winter grazing conditions our cow’s willingness to seek out and consume the full range of plant species provides us with enough forage to extend our grazing season far beyond what is traditional in our area.

The cost saving on this extended season grazing alone certainly far exceeds the \$16/head figure identified in the feedlot heifer research.

As with anything influenced by nature I can’t claim every Luing is able to maintain itself in great condition year round on willow bushes and thistles but the way we run our cows and select our replacements means that our percentage of poor foragers is very small. We follow the philosophy of the founders of the Luing breed in Scotland on foraging ability: *“This breed is essentially a roughage convertor – large quantities of grain and concentrates are not a requisite of its diet – performance testing of the Luing must be done not on high concentrate diets, but on grass products to show its commercial viability.”*

Doesn’t that just make more sense than performance testing bulls on grain in a feedlot?

## Canadian Luing Cattle Association

c/o Mr. Iain Aitken (Secretary/Treasurer)  
Blacketlees Farm  
RR4, Rimbey, Alberta T0C 2J0  
Phone: (403) 843-0094  
Email : [iaineaitken@gmail.com](mailto:iaineaitken@gmail.com)  
URL: [www.luingcattle.com](http://www.luingcattle.com)

### Directors of the Association

Mr. Wilf Chelle (250) 772-5607  
Mr. Paul Galbraith (250) 346-3100  
Mr. Jeff Longard (780) 682-3805  
Mr. Brady Merrells (403) 637-8690