

Can You Comprehend the Vastness of the Beef Industry?

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Country of origin labeling (commonly called COOL) and national cattle identification programs have generated much news recently. The resulting discussion has prompted beef industry leaders to wonder who really understands the whole business of beef production from conception to consumer.

Consumers and producers alike have seen neat slide presentations that tell the romantic story of beef producers and how the theoretical flow from conception to consumption works. But, that is life in the movies. The actual process of production is another story.

Identifying cattle is not easy, and utilizing the identification is even more difficult. As the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association continues the process of cattle identification and records processing, the search for new producers also continues. A large number of cattle producers indicated slight to no interest improving the identification of their cattle.

In theory, logic solidly supports the need for identification (mandatory or voluntary) because there is a need to trace cattle to their source. In practice, the picture is fuzzy. Many producers work and produce beef in areas almost uninhabitable by people. Mother cows are never individually handled or even seen for most of the year.

These tough, self-sufficient cows produce calves on a regular basis. Seldom sick, the cows likely view the rancher as more of an accepted predator than a desired provider. Last week at the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center, a regular cattle-working week was scheduled. Eighty-eight cow-calf pairs on one section of land were due for ultrasound exams for pregnancy and pre-weaning vaccinations. The geography is rough, with several draws for cows to camp in, but manageable on horse back. Five riders started the day at 7 a.m., rounding up the cows and calves.

The location is 35 or more miles from the main headquarters and 15 miles from the ranch headquarters. Half an hour is needed to get to the ranch, half an hour to gather and load horses and tack in two trailers, and another half

an hour to drive over to the pasture. A few rain drops hit the windows, a welcome relief from the August drought.

After the 90 minutes of preparation, roundup begins. The cattle have spread themselves out into five herds in different parts of the pasture. Cattle arrive from all points and are confined in the portable corral. Those few raindrops have turned into a major rain, and the crew settles down to wait it out.

Reviews of weather radar indicate the rain is here to stay. Operating the electrical equipment -- the scale, ultrasound and two generators -- seems ill advised with water running everywhere. The work day is canceled, the cattle held up in the corral and the crew returns to headquarters for lunch.

The next day brings sunshine. Cattle are knee deep in mud (a day's growth lost on the calves). The crew arrives, the cows are ultrasounded, the calves vaccinated and the facilities pulled and the pasture and cattle return to what they naturally do.

Mud is everywhere. No boots, pants or shirts are even close to presentable. The ground is scarred for the time being, raw with the fresh wounds of concentrated cattle. In the end, 88 cow/calf pairs are worked and tags read.

The data (to enhance the workings of the cattle operation) is transferred to a clean sheet, ready to be filed. Many producers, however, find data difficult to collect because crew members are nonexistent, pickups are weak with mileage, corrals are shedding nails and aging bones need a rest.

The cattle industry is truly a vast industry. This vastness is not yet comprehended by many, especially those busy making, or at least suggesting the right way to find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0161.

May You Find All Your Ear Tags

