

Take a look, it's in your hands

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“You hold the world in your hands” is an apt description of the beef business. It is evident during the winter beef cattle meeting circuit.

There is discussion about tracking cattle, premises-to-premises movement of animals, or going all the way and actually tracking individual animals. The meeting probably will get a little spicy if you add to the discussion the movement of cattle across international borders.

I was asked the other day what I think of all this discussion. No quick point came to mind, but I did think of the producers I know and pondered what they must think. The answer is simple; look at their hands.

Many of the senior producers that have crossed my path don't need to speak long words in neat sentences. They have lived the beef business. Over the years, their fingers have thickened, their joints have become somewhat molded, their skin is as strong as canvas and they may have a finger or two missing. For some producers, a hand is gone.

The beef business has been and still is a hands-on business. These producers have lived the challenge. Through subzero weather, they carry a wet, soggy, half-dead calf across the yard. Their hands have long ago given over to absolute numbness and control transferred to the arms, which are not as agile but capable of a wrapped rope and tug. Finally arriving at some facsimile of shelter, the producer finds out the cow didn't follow, so back he goes.

Three more cows are busy calving. The sun is starting to come up, the north wind is dying down, but at least the calf still is alive as the cow finally is busy licking off the calf. For the calf, soon to follow will be a good feed of warm colostrum milk. The thought of a drink brings up the thought of a good cup of coffee, but your hands are so cold you can't get the lid off the thermos. Even if you could, there is no way you would ever be able to hold a coffee cup long enough to get the coffee to your mouth.

However, the thought prevails and soon it's off to the house. Off come the big outer boots, frozen gloves and

shoes, the thermal coverall and then chipping the ice off the zipper to expose the metal pull tab. A short tug sends ice flying and finally the coverall slips off, only to be set outside so it doesn't thaw and get damp before the next trip outside.

The innerwear is actually outerwear for most folks and generally meant to cover up the middlewear. The middlewear actually may be allowed in the kitchen, if not penetrated by calf fluids. If so, you actually may get down to the true innerwear (not to be mistaken for underwear), generally a layer of long underwear covering short underwear.

If the producer is under 25, a set of gym trunks will be in between the long and short underwear. By now, you change your mind on the coffee and decide to jump back in bed, only to be told in not so nice words, “you're too cold.” So, the coffee pot perks, the morning radio program is on, and finally some warmth.

The radio announcer introduces a local cattle expert from the university for some thoughts on calving. The guest notes, “Now is the time to get all those ear tags in those new calves.” You look at your hands, the fingers starting to move, and ponder and conclude, “No way! What is this world coming to?”

What do I think? Winter has been pleasant this year, a bit of a reprieve from the cold, but the cold is never far away. Likewise, the technology that is knocking on the door is coming. The gaps are huge, and frankly, we all have a long way to go. Time will tell what our hands do.

May you find all your USAIP 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 BT0235.

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