

The Beef Business is Full of Optical Illusions

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The phone rings. The producer answers and the voice on the other ends says, “We have a question on one of those calves you sold. Could you pull its record? We shipped it yesterday.”

This reality check will be said repeatedly as the beef business moves into the future. Individual animal (and producer) accountability is arriving fast and the days of optical illusions may well end soon.

The Dickinson Research Extension Center experienced firsthand the illusions of the beef industry. Recently, the center attempted to source and age verify 21 purchased calves. More than 14 percent of the tags were not readable in the calving book. The Quality Systems Assessment (QSA) form, with all relevant questions left blank, was signed by the producer and returned to the center.

This simple transaction only scratches the surface. Add on tag loss, replacement and corresponding data spillage throughout the marketing channels and the question pops up, “Are you really ready for accountability?” Not only that, but on arrival at the feed yard, the calves were tagged with QSA tags, with the assumption all forms were signed.

What is overlooked in the industry is that these processes take time. We all need to take that time to read the fine print, give some thought to what we are signing and verify what we are signing. The phone call about a calf is no illusion.

The road for beef producers has split. The first path is to meet a changing world with progressive enthusiasm and dressed for change. The other path is to fine-tune the art of optical illusion and continue down the path of yesterday.

I’m sorry if some are offended, but the beef business is full of optical illusions. There seems to be a significant portion of the industry willing to accept change, provided no change is actually made. The discussion is good, the cowherd withstood the blizzard of 1987 and recent droughts. So what is there to change?

A wake-up call should be the enormous efforts made to open the export market to Japan, only to find the vast

majority of cattle in the U.S. don’t qualify. So what is the fundamental problem?

Briefly, the beef industry has been, is and appears to want to stay a lot- or pen-based business operating at a self, predefined “speed of commerce.” Individual accountability is not capable of keeping up with that “speed of commerce.”

Today, beef product development is good, consumer demand is even better and the industry is meeting the challenges presented. Don’t encumber business with individual accountability is the motto.

Individual animal identification, traceable and verifiable back to the individual producer, buyer, seller, backgrounder, feedlot owner or packer, is simply not desired in the present mode of doing business in beef. Pros and cons can be made and even by the pros, considerable underestimation of cost is evident.

Unfortunately, such an environment is ripe for illusion. Optical illusions appear compliant, but in reality only shuffle accountability down the line until, ultimately, the original producer signs the form, picking up the slack in the marketing chain.

QSAs or PVPs, (don’t worry about what the letters stand for, that is the least of your worries) may fill files, but don’t tag calves. The forms state very clearly that all the individual calf data is available at the ranch, is fully auditable, and can be verified for every calf.

I have seen many calving books. I suspect there are very few that would meet the criteria, unless handwriting has improved, pencils sharpen themselves, ink doesn’t run or hands were washed each time the book was opened. Who is kidding whom?

Remember, a group is only a conglomeration of individuals.

May you find all your NAIS-approved 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 BT0281.

Can You Read Me Now?

Unless handwriting improves, pencils sharpen themselves, ink doesn't run or hands are washed each time – CALVING BOOKS ARE NOT INFALLIBLE

The Dickinson Research Extension Center purchased a group of steer calves, but upon tracing, 14 percent of the calves were not legible in the calving book.