

You Can Bet Your Ribeye Steak That Ranchers Will Adapt and Survive

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There is an old but common saying that is appropriate for the beef business today: *“About the time you figure everything out, the rules change.”*

As 2003 drew to a close, most in the beef industry were smiling. But the reality check hit over the holidays in the form of BSE (mad cow disease). The news coverage, which has certainly been ample, had most beef producers on the edge of their seats. The industry can take some good credit keeping everybody in real-time and focusing on the assurance of beef value and wholesomeness. At the same time, consumers could base their information on facts, not fiction.

Beef producers are at another fork in the road. Technology in our industry continues to change to fit the times. The rate at which we were expected to adapt and implement that technology was a challenge during the last decade. Those expectations have ramped up even more today, causing even the most seasoned rancher to shiver, even with a good pair of long johns on.

Most ranchers have faced issues requiring change before.

The first would be branding. Once a rancher realized there were more people interested in raising beef than just himself, or at least more people interested in his beef, the need to identify cattle became urgent and branding was adopted. The rancher adapted and survived.

Then came fencing. As grazing areas were settled and divided up, the days of free range *“vast expanses of grass open for grazing”* were gone. The rancher improvised and along came the concept of fencing. The rancher adapted and survived.

The old longhorn cow turned her head, and to her surprise, a four legged creature, red in color with a face white as snow, was walking across the draw. That new critter smelled like a bull, walked like a bull, and bred like a bull. In the springtime, the best-muscled calves the rancher had ever seen speckled the landscape. The

rancher adapted and survived.

Riding all those pastures on horseback was an absolute. So were cowboys, wrangling crews and chuck wagons. Although you will still find horses on many ranches, the gas-powered engine soon arrived and pickups and four-wheelers became a new trademark of ranching. The rancher adapted and survived.

For years, cattle roundups and drives got cows and calves where they needed to go. Then gooseneck trailers arrived. The rancher adapted and survived.

Next came crossbreeding. Moans rose to the roof of the sale barn as buyers puzzled over that last pen of calves. Some rancher had allowed his Angus bull to breed Hereford cows and the calves were black with a white face. The rancher adapted and survived.

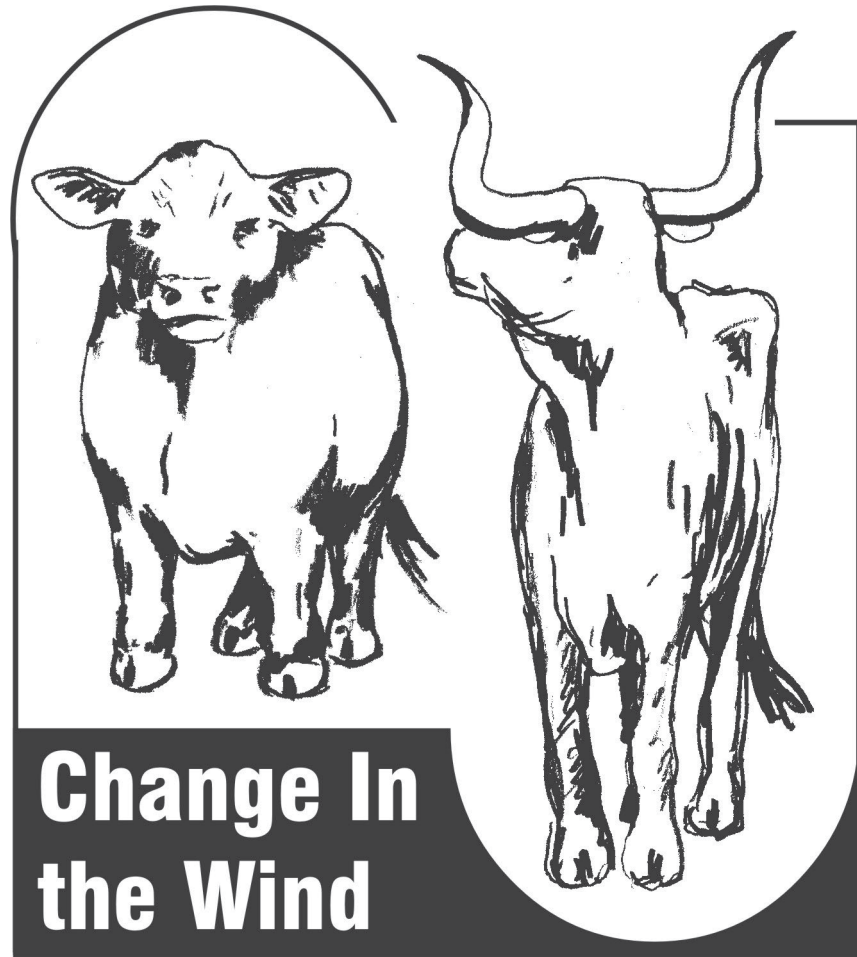
My goodness, no such cow could be bred to a bull as big as that white bull. Certainly wouldn't most of the calves die at birth? Continental cattle arrived. The rancher adapted and survived.

Data collection was the next major challenge. Joe bought a bull based on numbers and hadn't even seen the bull. Can you imagine that? Estimated progeny differences (EPDs) arrived. The rancher adapted and survived.

Health care for calves followed. Veterinarians said the calves need something called vaccinations. And the guy in the suit says someone will actually pay me to do it, which sounds like a load of you know what. Preconditioning arrived, and the rancher adapted and survived.

And so here we are today. I don't know what change is in the air, but I do know the rancher will adapt and survive. May you 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 BT0177.



**Change In
the Wind**