



BeefTalk 671: Good Fences Make Good Neighbors

SUPPORTING MATERIALS



“Good fences make good neighbors.”

– Mending Wall by Robert Frost –

Upon bull turnout, there are no happy faces if a neighbor's bull is seen in with the cows.

There is a centuries-old saying: “Good fences make good neighbors.” In his 1914 poem “Mending Wall,” Robert Frost twice uses this saying as two neighbors set about mending a wall, which we would today call a fence.

The points made in the saying are very true. Anyone who has a fence certainly must ponder why all the effort is being made in keeping a fence. Frost notes the difficulty of maintaining a fence as the forces of nature beat upon the structure. From above or below ground, the seasons of winter, spring, summer and fall all battle against the placement of any fence.

Then come the deliberate and trying repairs because of hunters who take fences down to simply gain access to game or other selected targets. They often leave gates open or gaping holes that cattle can walk through.



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Twice now, the Dickinson Research Extension Center has had to retrieve cattle from previous pastures because people have failed to shut the gates between pastures. Pasture rotations are good, but rotated cattle do not stay rotated when gates are left open.

Frost and his neighbor walked the fence line to replace rough rock. We routinely walk fence lines to add staples, stays and fence clamps to upgrade or repair an old fence. The comment is made in the poem of rough hands being pummeled by rough rocks. Today, as we walk, cuts and scrapes crisscross one's hands with little fuss.

Frost begs the question of his neighbor as they walked through a tree planting: Why have a fence at all? The neighbor, assumed to be more seasoned in the trade, simply states: “Good fences make good neighbors,” so the two keep on fixing the fence.

Frost notes that cows certainly would warrant a stronger fence. To him, a fence between apple and pine trees made no sense. No tree is going to uproot itself and move over to the neighbor's parcel of land. However, the question falls on

deaf ears and only inspires a stronger effort at rebuilding the fence.

Frost notes that there is something inherently wrong with a fence that seems to have no purpose other than to be an irritation to those on both sides of the fence. After a lengthy oration by Frost questioning the purpose of a fence to separate the pine and apple trees, the neighbor only replies: "Good fences make good neighbors." The poem ends with this phrase.

There is much about this poem that is very relevant to today's beef producers. The main point is that fences have been part of the agricultural landscape for centuries. The ability to keep separate the agricultural products of one farm or ranch from another was critical. In many ways, a fence was the original source verification of farm and ranch produce.

Today, ranchers may have very different selection criteria and will pay good money for bulls that are meant to breed their cows. Upon bull turnout, there are no happy faces if a neighbor's bull is seen in with the cows. The center does not turn bulls out until Aug. 1, but the crew always is on the lookout for rogue bulls. There is no joy in separating unwanted bulls, so good fences make good neighbors.

If bulls or cows do not stay put despite all the efforts to repair a fence, they need to be returned home. Stronger fences will keep the cows and bulls where they need to be. However, there may come a point where the more difficult bulls and cows simply need to go the way of market beef.

Keeping unwanted genetics at bay or simply not wanting to feed the neighbor's cattle are the most obvious reasons for good fences. However, there is another reason that often is overlooked, which is keeping unwanted pathogens out of the herd.

Pathogens, although smaller than what can be seen by the rancher's eye, are causative agents of disease. The more common agents are bacteria or viruses. Regardless of what agent, producers do not want them in their herd because these pathogens will spread. However, they generally do not spread easily.

The best prevention is to make sure only cattle that are pathogen-free enter the herd. If a producer went through the effort to test the herd for common pathogens and the herd is found to be free of pathogens, then the herd is clean. However, if the herd is pastured next to another herd that has not been tested or may be infected with a pathogen and the fence fails and the cattle are comingled, the herd is no longer considered pathogen-free.

Thus, we have the importance of keeping good fences and quickly fixing problems while always remembering: "Good fences make good neighbors!"

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>. For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

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