Volume 6 Issue 2

Farm Update

We have experienced a long dry period here in Oregon over the last several months that has dramatically reduced the production of grass. This has been a test for our Shorthorns since it has occurred during the highest demand on them raising a calf and getting rebred. Fortunately they seem to be managing quite well although the feeding of hay at an early date this summer will probably be necessary due to a complete lack of pasture. Cattle's ability to adjust to weather variables is an important trait that Shorthorns excel in.

We have commenced the selling of Heritage Shorthorn IVF embryos through our new Shorthorn Select Genetics website (www.shorthornselectgenetics.com).

Quarterly Topic: Corn Versus Grass

With the constantly evolving political environment it is difficult for cattle producers to make long range plans especially when there are large numbers of political entities bent on permanently putting us all out of business. For many years I have believed that will eventually occur through increased targeted taxation and new draconian regulations. As artificial food production ratchets up, and people become further removed from farming, the "reeducation" plans of animal rights groups, vegans, climate change fanatics, and other aligned factions make this an increasing possibility. Further evidence of this trend are the current proposals in both Colorado and Oregon to essentially ban animal agriculture. So the question becomes: Is there hope and how can the cattle industry best adapt to this new reality?

Historically

Throughout history cattle and grass have had a synergistic relationship. Grass provided food for cattle and cattle provided fertilizer for grass. This "peaceful" coexistence allowed for traditional farmers to produce low cost beef while making a reasonable living. Certainly different types of feed products were introduced into cattle diets to improve productivity but there never was an all encompassing movement toward confined feeding operations (CFOs) as we see today. This dynamic change resulted in a whole new industry that revolves around corn/ethanol byproducts, CFOs, and four large integrated meat packers in the USA.

Corn Movement

For many cattle producers the synergy that exists between corn and fat cattle has been the basis of their business model. More corn equals more weight. Obviously the selection process in breeding cattle that fit this production model is quite different from the historical development of beef breeds where they were selected to match a particular environment creating a landrace. I think it is fair to say that modern beef breeds have become more of a "cornrace". This selection process, for a particular type of cattle, may have side affects. Recently there has been a tremendous increase in cases of Beef Congestive Heart Failure

(BCHF) in feedlot cattle which may be the result of genetic selection and nutritional imbalances associated with high growth rates in beef cattle. As composite cattle (all-blacks) become more popular commercially, and the importance of individual breeds becomes a forgotten virtue, the opportunities to actually adapt to changing societal mores becomes lost. This unfortunate development makes the elimination of the cattle industry a more likely scenario. One can debate the environmental impact of cattle and corn ad infinitum but the reality is that society is coming to the belief that beef production wastes resources while having a very negative effect on the environment. The extra step that it takes to convert corn from food to steaks is a "cost" many in society no longer believe is advantageous. All the Genomic EPDs, all the breed promotion, and all the "Beef-It's What's For Dinner" ads will be for naught if society becomes convinced that beef is bad for the environment and wastes valuable resources in the production process. This is definitely where the corn model becomes muddled because corn itself requires a lot of input from seed to harvesting. Items such as fertilizer, chemicals, fuel, and equipment are all part of the environmental costs that are incurred. To take corn another step by feeding it cattle to produce meat entails additional environmental costs rather than using corn directly as a human food product. Certainly the corn consumed by cattle is different than the type of corn people eat but the production costs are very similar.

Grass

Pastoral scenes of cattle have existed throughout history and their bucolic effects have been rightfully chronicled. For the general public cows grazing in a field is a much more pleasant visual than a malodorous feedlot. This alone is a positive for grass fed beef. In today's hypersensitive environment presenting a product in a positive light has become paramount. The simplicity of the grass fed beef production model caters to the desires of the "new concerned consumer". Local production, no hormones, no growth implants, no antibiotics, and reduced environmental impact all present an alluring alternative for the new beef buying public. Cost is still a factor for most consumers but it is not the deciding factor it once was. The "hamburger crowd" is still out there but many now want an environmentally friendly burger that is raised in a regenerative agricultural system. By catering more to this type of consumer the beef industry may be able to stave off the onslaught which is being engineered to put it out of business. I have long believed, that with proper genetic selection and modern management, grass fed steers can be winners in the store and on the farm. The grass fed beef model will fill a long term niche that can never be replicated with corn fed beef. Embracing and expanding the grass fed model will allow producers to have more control of their destiny while supplying the beef desired by the beef buying public. This is not a pollyanna approach and I realize there is not enough grassland in existence to move all beef production to the grass-fed model. Nonetheless the grass-fed model can project a much more positive image for the beef industry as a whole while establishing a larger worthwhile production niche that can be profitable and self-sustaining. If we continue only in "feeding" the CFO/corn model, that will hasten the demise of the cattle industry and leave the beef industry open to ever increasing attacks.

The Future

Predicting the future is at best risky and at worst self-deprecating. Obviously I am a glutton for punishment because I continue to take on taboo cattle subjects that are ignored by many. In my opening statements I said the demise of the cattle industry is only a matter of time and I strongly believe it will happen over the next 100 years, if not sooner. Adjustments in production methodology can certainly delay what I see as the inevitable, but not stop it. Management practices that embrace more of the environmentally friendly grass based models will limit the negative publicity of CFOs while providing a more localized beef production

industry that the general populace can better relate to. Without a massive overhaul in the beef industry it will become an even bigger target for the vegan movement that is fast becoming dominant throughout the food industry. News stories everyday point to major corporations bowing to the vocal opponents of beef and embracing meat alternatives. These corporations are about one thing: making money. If they did not sense a “sea change” in the food buying public they would not be producing novel “fake meat” products themselves and calling for ever increasing regulation of the beef industry. This is the “new normal” and the sooner beef producers realize it the sooner they can take the steps necessary to adjust to this new paradigm.

Topic For The Next Issue: Thoughts On Cattle Shows And Sales