



Breed Improvement Article

Unlearning Our Industry

By Sean McGrath

I recently read an interesting article about the process of “unlearning”. Basically the article points out that we learn things throughout our lifetime that are reinforced through teachers, neighbours, popular press and society at large. Often as the world changes we must “unlearn” what we know and are comfortable with in order to reach a new level of understanding and progress.

Farm managers and the industry as a whole have had a massive amount of change to deal with over the past several years. Changes in trade regulations and the global and domestic marketplace, advances in science and new investment in the processing sector of our industry have all created a tremendous need to unlearn our historic approaches to doing business. This is not to say that fundamental principles of business do not apply, rather that traditional methods of doing business may not apply to everyone anymore.

In the last several weeks I have had the privilege to talk to several producers and also to visit some of the new initiatives being developed by active players in the Canadian beef industry. Many of these new ventures include aspects of information sharing and fiscal rewards for producing a product desired by the respective system. This represents a huge mindset shift and a reward structure away from commodity beef production.

As producers become more interested in end product merit, it is extremely important that their seedstock supplier provides them with the information that they require to optimize their profitability.

Producers who are feeding out their cattle have a great need for cattle that perform on feed. Historically, many of these producers sold at weaning and did not pay much attention to performance on feed, as their profit driver was weaning weight. Producers and their seedstock suppliers need to pay attention to Post-Weaning Gain EPD (PWG) to positively impact rates of gain.

Another aspect to unlearn is that of carcass merit. The prevailing message over the last several years has been marbling, marbling and then some more marbling. Producers are now entering specific programs that may target different endpoints. Within each system different genetics will produce the desired product. As well, in the commercial industry, the makeup of the cowherd will have a tremendous impact on the profile of sires that are most effective.

There are some programs that require low degrees of marbling and high yield while maintaining strict carcass weight guidelines. There are other programs that are rewarding the combination of marbling with high yields. Generally speaking, on a British based cowherd this requires more emphasis on Limousin genetics with more lean yield. On Continental cross cowherds, emphasis may shift towards marbling. I have had many conversations of late with producers who are getting their carcass and payment information back and are effectively unlearning what they thought they

knew about their cowherds. They are also creating a starting point or baseline to tailor their genetics towards profitability within their chosen marketplace.

As breeders, it is becoming important to unlearn some of the traditional ideas about seedstock selection and move towards somewhat untraditional "information driven" systems approaches, since that is what many of our customers and potential customers are doing. These information seekers are actively unlearning and are changing our industry in the process.

The new information the unlearners need...

Many producers are moving into feeding their own cattle, and are directly involved in packing/processing ventures. These producers require information on post-weaning performance and carcass merit.

Breeders can actively assist their own programs by collecting and reporting weaning and yearling weights on all cattle that they have on farm.

As well, ultrasound of replacement females and bulls is very informative as it is highly related to progeny carcass performance. Another option for cattle that do not meet the specifications to be replacement quality or for sire verified feeder cattle is to collect carcass data. For carcass information, more than yield grade and quality grade is required. Information required for genetic evaluation includes carcass weight, rib-eye area size, fat thickness, marbling grade and score.

Further information on carcass data collection can be found in archived issues of the Breed Improvement Article on www.limousin.com.