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# GRASSROOTS NEWS & VIEWS OCTOBER 2020

## Chairman's Note - Alex Robertson

### Howdy folks;

After the great challenge we all faced last year with the early snow, getting harvest and other fall jobs done, this year has certainly been a welcome change. What an incredible fall! Harvest is pretty close to being done for most areas, and we are soon going to be getting into weaning time. With all that nice moisture we had in May and June this year pasture, hay, and grain yields were on the good side of average, although a little more rain in August would have helped out the grain crops in our area. We sold some calves via the online auction last month for November delivery, and the prices appeared to be slightly higher than last year. It's nice to see things going our way a little bit this year.

It has been very challenging for the staff at FFGA to present field days this year due to the COVID restrictions. However, with a few partners, Laura and Sonja have been able to provide some webinars that folks can safely watch from the comfort of their own homes. As mentioned last month, these can be accessed through the FFGA website to watch or even re-watch at your convenience. Please check them out. There's some great information in there.

Another interesting form of learning/entertainment I have caught on to this year is podcasts. There are many forms available, whether it's a replay of your favorite radio host's program or something totally new, they are a great form of knowledge. One of my favorites is 'Working Cows' based in the USA. They interview many of the speakers we have hosted or are hoping to host in Alberta. If you know of any other Agricultural related ones, feel free to let me know.

In late July, we welcomed four new Directors to the board. Daryl Chubb, who you heard from last month, as well as Tanis Cross, Daniel Doerksen, and Emily Lowe. We are looking for the enthusiasm

and new ideas that they will bring to the board.

This past month we were able to host two pasture rejuvenation workshops featuring the expertise of Grant Lastiwka and Graeme Finn. A few takeaways from the day were:

1. the use of quick regrowth cultivars of Alfalfa in your pasture mix will likely be to the detriment of the longevity of the stand
2. the importance of seed preparation and keeping the grass/legume seeds in the 1/4 - 1/2 inch depth range
3. the importance of a diverse mixture of grasses and legumes in a pasture
4. the ability of Sainfoin and, to a lesser degree, Birds Foot Trefoil to prevent bloat when in a mixture with Alfalfa; the tannins within them help slow the digestion of the Alfalfa
5. the question of why your pasture needs rejuvenation to begin with? If you don't address the reason of what led to the degeneration of your pasture, then the expensive procedure of re-establishing grasses and legumes could likely be a waste of time and money.

For those of us who travelled to Brazil on the first international trip hosted by FFGA, it is hard to believe that 10 years have passed. That trip was such a memorable experience and certainly set the standard for future trips that followed. It's been a great opportunity provided by the Association, and over the years we saw eight more international trips following that first great one. With the new travel challenges, we will be looking at staying in Canada and exploring what our own country has to offer. We may not get a hot destination, but it is always good to observe agricultural practices in another environment and an opportunity to do that in our own country is definitely worth doing. Keep posted for details.

On a personal note, since my Director's letter from last year, the number of grandchildren for Carol and I have doubled to four. If it doubles again by next year, someone might be in trouble. Take care and have a great fall.

**Alex Robertson**

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*The Robertson ladies checking cows at the Cross U Ranch*

# WLPIP helps producers minimize risk in volatile marketplace



Photo: Submitted

The Western Livestock Price Insurance Program provides cattle producers a way to minimize risk in an often-volatile marketplace. When a producer purchases a policy under the program, it protects their investment on calves, feeders and fed cattle and hogs.

Currently, few effective risk management options exist that allow producers to manage their risk. The Western Livestock Price Insurance Program (WLPIP), which is available to producers in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, is market-driven to reflect the risks a producer in Western Canada faces.

“Livestock producers are typically price takers,” explained Brenda Hagen, WLPIP Product Owner with Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC). “The many factors impacting the market mean prices vary greatly year to year.

“Having a tool available to help protect against the unknowns of the market and associated price volatility can help producers make their operations more profitable.”

Under the program, producers pay a premium for forward price coverage,

which packages the risks of price, currency, and basis into one product. If the market price falls below the coverage price, in the timeframe selected, the producer receives a payment.

“Significant payouts were made during the height of the COVID-19 uncertainty as volatility in the financial markets, changes in retail and food services demand and slowdowns at the nation’s packing plants played out in the local market,” said Hagen.

“In total, \$107 million was paid to Alberta producers to offset the losses they were experiencing on their cattle sales.”

## COVID-19 & WLPIP premiums

In addition to leaving many policyholders in a payment position, the pandemic also affected WLPIP premiums. Market uncertainty, compounded by delays in the slaughter industry driven by COVID-19 related slowdowns, closures and changes in consumer and food service demand, drove premium rates to unprecedented highs in early spring.

Premiums are priced on risk factors, said Hagen, with the most impactful being the volatility underlying the futures market.

“COVID-19 created uncertainty for all commodities, and cattle and hogs were no exception and experienced significant spikes in volatility in March and April,” said Hagen. “As a result, premiums escalated during those months as the future was uncertain. Volatility for the cattle programs hit a program

high since the inception of WLPIP.”

This increased uncertainty and volatility led to a three-week extension to the calf policy purchase deadline. The extension gave producers more time to analyze the program and decide if WLPIP coverage fit their operation. Unlike feeder, fed cattle and hog policies, calf policies are only available for purchase in the spring.

“Fortunately, the volatility did subside into May and June as the markets took into consideration the industry’s response to COVID-19, and this is reflected in a reduction of premium costs.”

## What’s next

The Western Livestock Price Insurance Program is currently undergoing a thorough review to make sure it aligns with producer’s risk management needs.

“We want to ensure WLPIP continues to meet the needs of producers now and into the future,” said Hagen. “We are looking to find ways to enhance delivery and affordability of the program.”

*Article submitted by FFGA Gold Sponsor AFSC*

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*On the Cover: Science class on the ranch. FFGA staff are helped by 2 eager, young gentlemen while soil sampling near Waterton, AB.*

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# Nitrate buildup a threat after a light frost



Photo by: Dean Baas

*When this happens you need to either harvest quickly or wait for nitrate levels to subside.*

Nitrate accumulation can become a problem when crops experience

light frosts of -1 C to -2 C for even only a few hours during the night.

These conditions damage the leaves of the plants, but not the roots. Over the next three to four days, the roots continue to send nutrients up the plant, and the damaged plant is unable to use those nutrients, resulting in nitrate accumulation.

“When we get a heavy frost of -5 C to -6 C for six or seven hours, the internal working system of the plant is completely destroyed and it can no longer move water or nutrients,” said beef and forage specialist Barry Yaremcio. “A killing frost means that the plants are dead and there-

fore nitrates won’t accumulate.

“It’s the light frosts experienced for only a few hours that damage the plant but not the internal bundles that are still able to move water and nutrients up the stem. The injured leaves can’t use the nutrients effectively, and that’s when there is the greatest chance of nitrate accumulation.”

Annual crops are the most susceptible to nitrate accumulation, oats being the worst, but also barley and wheat. Immature salvage canola crops cut for silage or greenfeed also has a tendency to accumulate nitrates.

“Alfalfa is a legume and the nodules attached to the roots tend to hoard the nitrogen and only release as much as the plants require,” said Yaremcio. “Nitrate accumulation is extremely rare in alfalfa.”

Application of nitrogen fertilizer or manure also increases the risk of nitrate accumulation.

“If fields have been used for swath grazing, winter feeding areas, have had high manure applications or high amounts of fertilizers applied in the spring, those fields are more susceptible to accumulate nitrate in the plants,” said Yaremcio. “If there’s been no fertilizer applied, or if it’s an old grass field, those fields are not typ-

ically a problem.”

After a frost, the timing for cutting the field is a key factor in managing nitrogen accumulation. “If producers can get out in the field the day after the frost and cut it as quickly as they can, there shouldn’t be a problem,” said Yaremcio. “Nitrate levels increase and peak on the third or fourth day after a frost.”

If there is time for the plants to recover, and no subsequent killing frost, then nitrate levels will decline and return to normal after 14 days.

“It’s either get out there the day after the frost and cut very quickly, or wait 10 to 14 days before cutting the field,” said Yaremcio.

Author: Alberta Agriculture and Forestry. Original article can be found at: <https://www.albertafarmexpress.ca/crops/forages/if-frost-hits-your-crop-harvest-quickly-or-wait-for-nitrate-levels-to-subside/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CNitrate%20accumulation%20is%20extremely%20rare%20in%20alfalfa.%E2%80%9D&text=%E2%80%9CNitrate%20levels%20increase%20and%20peak,to%20normal%20after%2014%20days>

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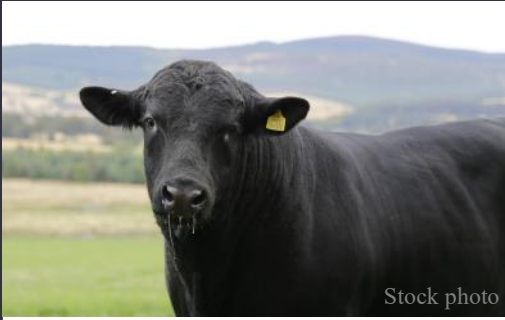


Seeding Rate Calculator



Forage Weed Management

# Making genomics work for commercial cattle herds



*DNA testing and genomic-enhanced EPDs could contribute to more profitable selection, management and marketing decisions for commercial producers.*

Although the use of genomics is frequently geared toward the seedstock industry, there are options that could lead to improved profits for commercial beef producers.

The use of simple DNA tests and genomic profiles enhancing the accuracy of expected progeny differences (EPDs) can have selection, management and marketing benefits for commercial operations, says Sean McGrath. McGrath, who runs Round Rock Ranching at Vermillion, Alta., and consults on genetic selection tools, presented an overview of these options at this summer's Ag in Motion Discovery Plus.

"Even if you're not directly, say for example, pulling DNA on animals and testing, you may become a secondary user simply through something like your seedstock supplier and how you're sourcing bulls," says McGrath.

"We either buy or manage DNA in our operations. That sets the potential for our cow herd and our calves that we sell. We can use it to sort feeders or to put feeders into a program that optimizes our expenses and optimizes our return."

For commercial producers, McGrath sees parentage testing as the easiest DNA test option with the most potential value for investment. Parentage can be useful for selecting replacement females based on what genetics you want to keep in the herd. For example, if you ran three bulls together and only wanted to retain heifers by a certain bull, a parentage test can identify those females.

Parentage testing can also be used as a marketing tool. "One that we

don't do a lot in Canada that I think has some implications as well would be to look at packaging feeder cattle genetics; identifying sires and grouping calves by sire or sire groups, and then marketing those calves based on the attributes they should receive from their sires," he says.

Other DNA tests available can detect whether an animal is a carrier of a genetic defect or of a single trait, such as the horned gene. A test for leptin can be used on feeder cattle to see which animals are leaner and which have more fat deposition, allowing for adjusted rations and time on feed.

"If we can shave 30 days off a calf to the time we finish it and put it into the marketplace, at \$3 a day to put that calf on feed it doesn't take long to pay for that simple DNA test."

A more in-depth option is to create an animal's genomic profile. This uses the DNA sample to examine how the different DNA markers "are related to specific genes and sort your cattle based on what genes we think are present from the marker data," says McGrath. "From a commercial industry perspective, probably the biggest place they would be useful directly would be for sorting replacement cattle."

For example, a genomic profile could include the genetic markers for maternal calving ease, birth weight, docility, heifer pregnancy rate, longevity and several carcass traits. As the science advances, more traits can be added to these profiles.

Genomics can then be used to increase the accuracy of another genetic selection tool. While seedstock producers are more often the target audience for EPDs, commercial producers can also potentially improve their sire selection with predictions enhanced by genomics.

Each EPD includes an accuracy number, which refers to the amount of information available to accurately calculate these predictions. On its own an EPD is less accurate for a younger animal, as it has fewer progeny and therefore less information. For example, a yearling may have an accuracy of 0.2 to 0.35 on its EPDs, but with its genomic profile added, those accuracies could be

boosted to 0.3 to 0.45.

A benefit of genomic-enhanced EPDs is the progeny equivalence. "This could be on a three-month-old heifer calf — if you've done a 50K genomic test on her, that's the same as if we already had 25 progeny from that animal in terms of calving ease."

Having this information available early in an animal's life can help producers make selection decisions that can potentially improve profits.

"Whether you know it or not, your two biggest costs are actually cow depreciation and cow herd maintenance," says McGrath.

"If we want to think about where genomics might fit in terms of these costs, does a cow that's two have better or worse genetics for longevity than a cow that's 15? And she may have better genetics, but she hasn't proven herself yet... We can use genomics to jumpstart that process, reducing cow depreciation and picking replacements."

Investing in these tools is only valuable if you're planning to use them to make changes to your program, such as reducing maintenance costs, choosing females that will stay in the cow herd longer or finding new marketing options.

"If I'm testing feeders for leptin or I'm buying bulls that sire better carcasses, am I still selling my calves in a pre-sort with a bunch of other calves I don't know anything about? If you're not going to change any of those aspects of your operation, then you're likely not going to receive the full benefits of some of the investments in genomics."

Author: Piper Whelan, Canadian Cattlement. Original article found at [https://www.canadiancattlemen.ca/features/making-genomics-work-for-commercial-cattle-herds/?utm\\_source=GFM+Publications&utm\\_campaign=5364d62626-Canada-Cattlemen+daily+enews+Oct+03%2C+2020&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_2da8244677-5364d62626-88437173](https://www.canadiancattlemen.ca/features/making-genomics-work-for-commercial-cattle-herds/?utm_source=GFM+Publications&utm_campaign=5364d62626-Canada-Cattlemen+daily+enews+Oct+03%2C+2020&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2da8244677-5364d62626-88437173)



# Is your ranch a “ranch of the future”



Stock photo

*Here's a look at a few trends that may redefine what ranching looks like.*

Occasionally I see or hear someone's description of the ranch of the future. So far, I haven't seen or heard one that I think does a very good job; and this one may do no better. Let's consider cattle ranches that, in addition to cattle, may have other livestock or cropping enterprises.

I see all types and kinds of cattle ranches. There are several types of hobby ranches. Some are owned by wealthy people who want to have a

fancy showplace where they can enjoy the scenery and outdoor activities.

Without wanting to offend, I struggle to call them ranches. They seem like recreation venues situated on a pretty piece of real estate; and I can't fault anyone for wanting to add that to their lifestyle.

Other owners act more like investors wanting a place to store and protect wealth. I usually find them to be serious about ranching profitably. If they don't, they will have trouble protecting their wealth.

I am acquainted with several of these ranches that are making good annual returns. I also know of some where the owners are tired of subsidizing the ranch from other earnings. Several of them have asked me if it is possible for a ranch with no indebtedness to make enough operating return to pay the property tax, all routine maintenance and the operating costs. My answer is that it can if you will manage it—meaning that changes

will have to be made.

Then there are family ranches that have been owned and operated by a family for a few years or for several generations. They are the most common and range in size from quite large to very small.

Many small cattle farms or ranches have one or both spouses working a day job away from the ranch to provide insurance and a basic family living. In other cases, one spouse works full time on the ranch. Some of these operators are happy to stay at their current small size and just enjoy the amenities offered by owning and operating a small farm or ranch. Profitability is seldom high and often is not high on the priority list. Others are seriously trying to grow their ranch into a larger full-time operation.

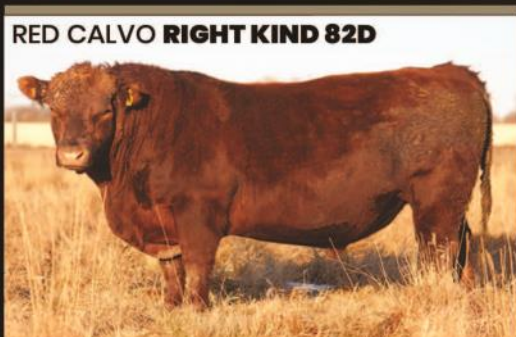
So, there are many types and sizes of cattle ranches. According to USDA data from 2019, 62% (well over half) of the beef cows in the U.S. reside on ranches of fewer than 200 cows.

*(Continued on page 6)*



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(Continued from page 5)

More than quarter (27%) are on ranches with fewer than 50 cows. In some cases, these smaller herds of cows are part of a grain or cash crop farm. So, trying to define the typical ranch is very difficult.

As I look at ranches with more than 200 cows operated by at least one full-time family member, I think I see a few trends emerging. These are not yet, and may not become, strong trends. But I think they will be important and place a new look or new characteristics on the “ranch of the future.”

One trend is a slow, yet impressive movement among farmers and ranchers to understand principles and adopt practices of soil health improvement. After a decade or more of distortion and terrible miss-use of the word “sustainable,” I hope we can maintain the proper definition of “regenerative.”

If your practices don’t result in quantifiable improvements in soil health and biodiversity with attendant reductions in the use of and need for chemical inputs, they are not regenerative. If, in your ranch of the future, you are going to claim to use “regenerative agricultural” practices, please walk the talk and get the results.

This trend toward better management of soil health is bringing cattle and other animals back to farms. Enterprises are being stacked to take ad-

vantage of symbiotic relationships where one plus one equals more than two.

There is a new increase in mixed enterprise farms and ranches. This comes from understanding that diversity of crops, animals, insects, birds, etc. is one of the principles upon which regenerative agriculture is built.

As this type of on-ranch management expands, there is an interesting increase in attempts to market farm and ranch products directly to households and small retail outlets. So, far there have been varying degrees of success, but direct marketing seems to be increasing.

With full time operators there is a trend toward fewer but larger ranches. This is driving a more significant trend of a separation of ownership and management. While this is slow, it is happening.

More people with wealth are seeing agricultural land as an excellent way to protect and store wealth. Its market ups and downs don’t correlate with stocks and bonds; and land will always have its intrinsic value. The operating returns will seldom be high; but operating returns on well managed ranches plus land value appreciation will typically beat the S&P. The problem is that not enough of them are well managed.

The combination of higher ranchland prices, relatively low operating rates of return, land value appreciation and the size of ranch required for a

sufficient income for one or two families is making ranchland ownership more attractive for those who can pay cash and use land as a store of wealth. Simultaneously, it becomes less attractive for operating ranchers who will need to use debt to buy a ranch that will not generate enough return to cover the interest rate.

This will provide many opportunities for ranch-raised young people, who can’t return to the family ranch, to instead manage good investor-owned ranches. I have a group of friends who have become top notch managers and are managing for absentee owners who want and sometimes demand profitability. I think that trend will continue.

One other trend is the rapid adoption of technology. This will continue because there are a lot of talented and inventive people developing new technology, eager salespeople trying to sell it and farmers and ranchers (too often gullible) ready to buy.

This is my greatest area of concern; just because we can doesn’t mean we should. (There is something “cool” about new technology.) There is and will continue to be wonderful technology that will make life easier and your ranch more profitable. But there will always be some that will do neither.

It is often ranch specific. What is good for one ranch may not be good for another. Some will certainly not make your ranch more profitable. I will be brave enough to suggest that much ranch technology will cost more than it returns. Be careful. Understand what you’re buying and do your arithmetic.

Author: Burke Teichert. Original article can be found at <https://www.beefmagazine.com/cow-calf/your-ranch-%E2%80%9Cranch-future%E2%80%9D>



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# Put antimicrobials, traceability, and biosecurity on your to-do list



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*All three areas are undergoing changes that producers should be aware of, says the Canadian Cattlemen's Association.*

There are things that beef producers need to look out for in the coming months when it comes to herd health and biosecurity.

"We do know that there are changes in play that will require all medically important antimicrobials to become prescription only," said Rob McNabb, general manager of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association.

Some medically important products are still available over the counter — not just through veterinarians. This will change, although there are still ongoing discussions between the federal government and the provinces on some details. Ottawa has the authority to determine what is sold by prescription and what can be sold over the counter, but the provinces play a major role, too.

"It's provinces that have the juris-

diction over the sale and distribution of veterinary pharmaceuticals," said McNabb, who is based in Calgary.

Antimicrobials should be a major focus for all producers because of a growing public concern about antibiotic resistance and the threat that poses. And while the beef industry does a pretty good job in using pharmaceuticals the right way, there is always room for improvement, he said.

Veterinarians can be a big help in advising producers on the use of medications, and also in lowering the incidence of disease and health issues — but they need to know the operation, he added.

"We want people to be aware that if they don't have a veterinary client/patient relationship, now would be a good time to get one," he said.

Producers should also watch out for a finalized traceability system. Regulations governing mandatory premise identification and animal movement will be finalized next year.

"That's a complex issue at the moment, because it requires both federal, provincial and industry collaboration in moving it forward," said McNabb.

Another thing that producers should watch out for is biosecurity. It's increasingly important to know where animals are coming from and their history, and to be cautious about introducing them to the rest of the on-farm herd, he said.

Biosecurity doesn't stop with just the animal traffic, either — people are also important components of maintaining proper biosecurity.

Producers should be vigilant about who is coming to their farm, whether or not these people have taken proper precautions and might be bringing "problems" onto a rancher's property, said McNabb.

"I think biosecurity is going to be of huge importance as we've seen with other species that seem to constantly have something happening. A lot of it can be routed back to a lapse in biosecurity, whether it is PEDv in hogs or avian influenza in poultry."

Biosecurity is a key part of the Verified Beef Sustainability Plus program (VBP+), which is going through another rebirth. The program is also tied in with the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef, which is expected to release the results of its pilot project this fall (2017). *(Results have been released. Visit VBP+ webpage to view).*

McNabb said the basic foundation of sustainability is in the VBP+ program, and that the program represents a minimum entry requirement to meet some of the demands of the global marketplace.

*Author: Alexis Kienlen. Original article can be found at <https://www.albertafarmexpress.ca/livestock/three-things-cattle-producers-need-to-maintain-for-herd-health/>*

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**Mission:** Assisting producers in profitably improving their forages and regenerating their soils through innovation and education.

**Vision:** We envision a global community that respects and values profitable forage production and healthy soils as our legacy for future generations.

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