

BIXS TO LAUNCH IN SEPTEMBER

It's secure, and free for at least three more years

When the Canadian Cattlemen's Association (CCA) spawned the Canadian Beef Advantage (CBA) strategy in 2008, it was twinned with the concept of developing an electronic database that could track individual animals as they move along the value chain using their national ID ear tag. The idea is the data would backstop the brand claims made for Canadian beef and ultimately improve the quality and profitability of the product.

Within the year, CBA had a national co-ordinator in Larry Thomas of Priddis, Alta., and a working database designed by the Calgary IT firm FoodLogiQ. The time since has been spent testing and refining the system in feedlots, packing plants and 120 cow-calf operations with dial-up and high-speed Internet connections across the country.

When BIXS is rolled out to cow-calf producers in September, the industry will have access to an information-sharing system for beef production unlike any in the world. And, it comes with two features everyone can appreciate — it's voluntary and free, at least for now. Funding is in place to keep the system running until 2013.

Thomas says it will initially be a barebones system but it is built to evolve as functions are added.

"If you want immediate gratification and premiums, maybe BIXS isn't for you," he says. "The value is in the process of being able to gather and share good individual animal and carcass information across the beef chain that will enable you to improve your management and marketing programs."

You would need a couple of years of data before it would be solid enough to sway management and marketing decisions. Using BIXS, for example, you could cross-reference your tag numbers with feedlot and packer data on those animals to evaluate your feed, health or breeding program, but you'd have to account for variables such as heavy mud in the feedlot that could affect



Larry Thomas

carcass quality and skew the short-term results.

At press time it looked like the system would be phased in starting with cow-calf producers linked to BIXS partners — Canadian Beef Breeds Council, Pfizer Gold, BioTrack and BeefBooster — and build quickly from there to absorb as much of the 2010 calf crop as possible into the database.

Feedlots will enter BIXS through a web-based computerized interface to speed up the transfer of data.

Canada's two main packers have said they will participate in BIXS. Another eight mid-sized plants are also preparing to enroll. Thomas expects 90 per cent of the federally inspected packing capacity in the country will be providing yield and grade data within a year or two. Federal approval of a new camera instrument for grading, expected within the year, will open the way to exchange very detailed carcass information on the system.

Thomas says the stand-alone, web-based database is secure and producers' core information will remain confiden-

tial. Optional data can be shared, but only with the producer's permission. Registration will be done online.

INFORMATION

BIXS is about sharing data on individual animals. Sharing is the key word. Basically, if you give data, you get data, Thomas says.

If you register your animals' CCIA tag numbers on BIXS you gain access to the required animal information as well as any optional data that previous or subsequent owners on the system have agreed to share. If you don't register you won't see any of it.

When BIXS is launched, go to *bixs.cattle.ca* on the Internet and follow the links to register and validate your account. All participants must provide their contact information, CCIA account number and CCIA animal tag numbers. Thomas highly recommends entering your premise ID number so you can take full advantage of the benefits BIXS provides.

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Cow-calf producers also must provide animal birth dates, the method of recording birth dates and their Verified Beef Program status.

Feedlots must provide entry weights and dates, health scores, exit dates and Verified Beef Program status.

Packers must provide the slaughter date, hot carcass weight, carcass quality grade, carcass yield grade and grade fat measure.

Auction markets have the option of reporting entry and exit dates.

At last count there were 35 optional fields for cow-calf producers under five categories covering birth date, production, vaccination, calving period and herd health.

In addition there are 45 optional fields for feedlots, 10 for packers, and nine for auction markets, to suit any specialized branding programs that the cattle may be on.

At the bare bones level, Thomas says they are also working with CCIA on an option that will automatically

update producer's BIXS records when they enter birth dates into the CCIA's traceability database.

SHARING

You can choose to use BIXS solely for your own record keeping purposes, share all optional data on a CCIA tag number with others who have registered information on the same animal, or share information at your own discretion in response to a query. Likewise, you can choose to always or never share your contact information.

BIXS program administrator Don Milligan, a former beef specialist with Alberta Agriculture, is in charge of maintaining the integrity of the database and conducting searches for participants who make queries. If the search reveals that your cattle meet the criteria, the administrator will forward the search specifications and the contact information of the person making the enquiry to you.

Third-party services, such as auction markets, veterinarians, feed companies and information technology

firms, will be able to connect with their customers on BIXS to provide services related to BIXS data upload, reporting, data analysis, marketing and options. For example, auction markets could organize special sales to draw in BIXS cattle with specific attributes that buyers are seeking for export markets, branded beef programs or certain management systems, and initiate a query through the BIXS administrator to notify producer participants who have cattle that meet the criteria.

The system will automatically generate a snapshot of your top 10 and bottom 10 animals in certain fields, such as weaning weight, average daily gain and carcass quality and yield grades, but it's up to you or your private consultant to do the strategic analysis.

"In time you will understand the beef your cattle become. That will let you showcase your herd and gain confidence in marketing with fact-based buying and selling negotiations," says Thomas.

— Debbie Furber 



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