

The beef information highway is under construction

Under the guidance of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, and with funding from the Canada/Alberta Legacy Fund, the Beef InfoXchange System (BIXS) has begun the first phase required to build a software application which will enable the transfer of information up and down the beef value chain. Larry Thomas, National Coordinator of the Canadian Beef Advantage and BIXS programs, tells us the "soft launch" which went out to 75

cow/calf producers this fall, revealed some interesting feedback.

"Participating producers from Ontario and all the western provinces are the "real life" engineers of this program," suggests Thomas. "They are the early innovators and understand just how valuable this information transfer can be to their individual operations. This test group has been very clear in telling us what they like and what they don't like. Among other aspects they provided feedback on the bene-

fits of a very specific type of data upload process."

During the cow/calf portion of the test, participating producers uploaded their RFID/CCIA tag numbers, CLTS premise ID number, animal birthdates and whether or not they were a Verified Beef Production operation (although that is not a prerequisite to participate in the program). Anything else was purely optional. "Many of these producers are leading edge and understand the huge window of opportunity that

will open down the road to empower them to more aggressively market their product and improve efficiencies on the ranch," says Thomas. "They identified a number of information options they would like to see for their individual operations."

Requests included a box for weaning dates and weights, castration dates and methods, calf vaccinations, cow herd vaccinations, dam and sire registration numbers, whether the animals are branded or native hided etc. "The program is designed so that



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you don't have to re enter the same information individually on a group or herd of cattle if the information is all the same," continues Thomas. "There are drop down lists that enable you to click on much of what you want to track which speeds up the process."

The bigger challenge for the IT people has been to adapt the program to both high speed and dial up computer users with a wide range of computer and web comfort levels. It has proven to be a major challenge. Presently, they are working on a single point entry for dial-up and high speed. If this doesn't appear to work satisfactorily, then a desktop solution

for low speed users may be the best option while high speed users will connect live to the web portal.

Obviously no matter how successful the development of this program becomes, without the cooperation and support of a feedlot and packer, it just won't fly. Along with several large feedlots in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario the CCA ran a beta test at Cargill plants in Guelph, High River and Wichita, Kansas, from January until April which tracked over 14,000 head of cattle. They followed age verified slaughter ready cattle through the packing plant, and Thomas pointed out that Cargill was extremely help-

ful in this pilot project.

"The CCA has met with both Cargill and XL about future participation in the BIXS program and they've both been positive about it. We still have to work out the details but they appear to be on side."

While all industry sectors have pointed to the collection and sharing of individual animal information as key to improving herd performance and matching the right animals to the right market, it hasn't been accomplished anywhere that Thomas is aware of. "Australia has a similar program in play," says Thomas, "but it isn't as encompassing as the proposed final BIXS, which



BIXS program's National Coordinator Larry Thomas - "We're creating a tool for innovative ranchers, markets, feedlots and packers that believe in the value of individual animal data."

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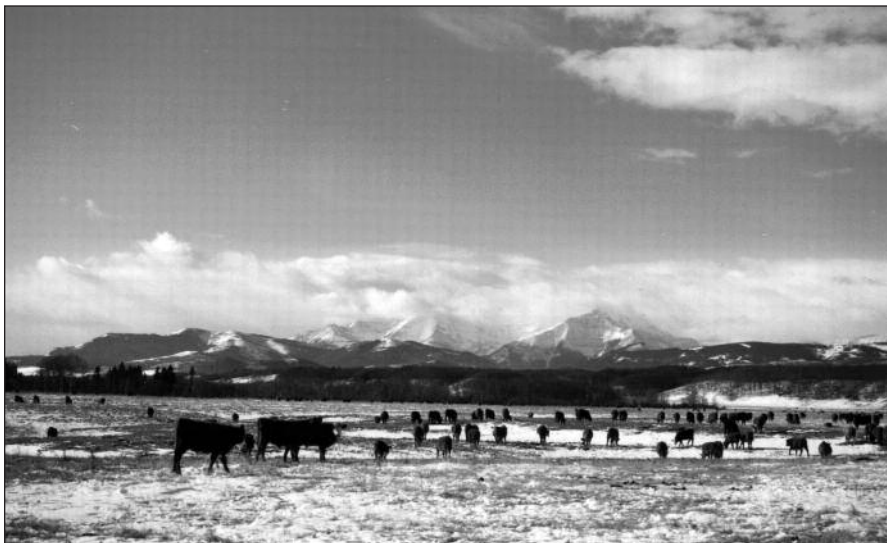
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will be a national voluntary program as well. We're taking our time with this, and won't release it out of the gate until we are absolutely sure it is working as close to perfect as humanly possible."

What is the value of this information?

"The value of this type of program means different things to different people," admits Thomas. "The value can be in the individual animal data flow. The action that each member of the value chain takes is the key to discovering a possible improved price difference."

As each member of the value chain is added to the model and critical mass is achieved, the possibilities are endless for market pull through. While BIXS maintains a confidentiality agreement with each member, there is an animal search process built into the program. BIXS member buyers, feedlots, packers etc. can ask for the BIXS program administrator to provide their contact information request to meet a certain set of protocols and the request is passed on to the owner of the cattle. It is then up to the owner to determine whether they wish to

make a sale or negotiate on the exchange of even more individual animal data. Searchers are never given the owners identity, or the results of a search. On the marketing side, performance information is a powerful tool.

In time, offers Thomas, and pending the results of ongoing traceability pilot projects, auction markets will be able to participate in the BIXS program. BIXS will also enable third party capabilities and platform partnerships whereby markets, vets, IT firms and others can interface with BIXS on their customers' behalf.

The possibilities seem endless. Receiving grading information, yield information, effectiveness of vaccination protocols, or how weaning weights and rate of gain stack up against the general BIXS population is empowering. Once users are able to collect the information, input it into a user friendly system and extract the carcass data, it is then up to each member of the value chain to determine where this new roadway leads.

Will it lead to a premium? Will it lead to improved efficiencies? Thomas suggests that it will take at

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least three years of data collection for the information to be really meaningful. It then becomes a matter of how to interpret the information. The CCA, for its part, will offer only a limited amount of benchmark data such as how your herd stacks up against the BIXS program cattle. The BIXS team has discussed the interpretation phase with several outfits including the Beef Improvement Opportunities people who specialize in distilling raw data for beef producers and feeders. While some producers will be able to take advantage of the data, others may turn it over to other IT firms and data analysts to extract the benefits.

"CCA is realistic in the sense that in five or ten years if we get 25 to 30 percent of cow/calf production on the program, then it's a success," says Thomas before leaving. "We're not out to knock off the commodity beef market or have any influence in price setting. We're creating a tool for innovative ranchers, markets, feedlots and packers that believe in the value of individual animal data, to finally collect whatever information they view as valuable and turn it into profit centre."

by Bonnie Warnyca



by Lee Gunderson

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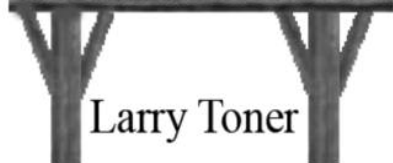
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