Cattleman's Corner

BEEF MANAGEMENT

Better beef marketing with BIXS

This new information exchange service for all sectors of the beef industry has a "soft launch" in September with full roll out by mid-fall

BY LEE HART

Canadian cow/calf producers be ready, BIXS will be rolling out this fall. What is that you wonder? BIXS (first reported in *Grainews* March/09) isn't a stylish new name for a great brand of American pickle (Bicks), although both are pronounced the same.

BIXS is the acronym for Beef InfoXchange System, an important information and marketing tool that ultimately will enable every cow/calf producer to learn how well their breeding program is working at the feedlot, packer and retail levels. That's just the beginning, however, as the system opens a whole new era in beef marketing.

BIXS is a totally voluntary system that makes use of the established livestock ear tag tracking system, which was launched in Canada in 2002. Producers who register and enter individual ear tag numbers into the BIXS program, can get basic performance reports back on how those cattle finished at the feedlot, as well as how they graded at the packing plant.

"Individual producers, beef clubs and breed associations have been looking for years for a system that provides feedback on a few very basic questions," says Larry Thomas, who is national co-ordinator of BIXS, a program developed as part of the Canadian Cattleman's Association Canadian Beef Advantage Initiative.

"Many producers have always wanted to know how calves they produced under any given cross-breeding program performed through the production chain. How are these calves finishing? How are they grading? Am I producing what the market wants? Other than the Blue Tag Program, which only applied to a few head, there was no consistent or detailed reporting system."

PROVIDES THE LINK

That's where BIXS comes into to finally connect all the dots. As the program name states, this is an information exchange system. Not only does the cow/calf producer get reports back from feeders and packers on how cattle performed, it is also a system feedlots, packers and retailers can use to signal and search the industry for the type and quality of cattle they need for markets.

Along with BIXS being totally voluntary, it is also totally confidential, says Thomas. A feeder isn't going to send Rancher Jones an email that says his calves are too thin, or improperly processed. But the feeders and the processors will be able to send their specifications for certain type of cattle to the BIXS program administrator. The program administrator can then relay those specifications to producers registered on the BIXS program.

Although auction marts aren't directly part of the BIXS system, they will be able to eventually partner with the information exchange system. In that scenario, perhaps an auction mart is planning a specific type of sale. They are looking for calves of X age, at X weight, that have been produced under a specific set of conditions. That information can be channeled to the BIXS program administrator, who in turn relays the specifications to producers registered on BIXS.

"It is marketing by specs," says Thomas. "The system can be used by feeders, packers, auction marts and even retailers to say this is the type of cattle we are looking for. It will then be up to individual producer to get in touch directly with the feeder, auction mart or whoever and say 'I have cattle that meet those specifications.' Once they make contact it will be up to them to negotiate any arrangement between themselves."

HOW IT WORKS

Here's an example of how the system might work:

Lets say a BIXS member feedlot, buyer or packer is looking for Angus-cross cattle born no earlier than March 2nd and no later than April 16th that have been vaccinated with a specific product or products. The BIXS member feedlot, buyer or packer must provide this query or search parameter to the BIXS program administrator along with their complete contact information. The program administrator analyzes the database according to the search parameters. BIXS cow-calf participant members with cattle in their inventory matching the search specs are then supplied the contact information of that BIXS member feedlot, buyer or packer. It is then up to the sole discretion of the BIXS cow-calf member participant to contact the searcher and begin building a business relationship.

Those launching a search of the BIXS database will not be supplied contact information of any cow-calf producer nor will the searcher be informed of the outcome of the program administrator's analyses of the database regarding the search parameters. In this way the BIXS maintains producer confidentiality yet empowers the system to act as a business tool for users.

At the onset BIXS will enable searches based on the following parameters:

- *Animal birthdates/date ranges*
- *Breed/crossbreed*
- *Castration date/method*
- *Weaning weight/weight range*
- *Vaccination date(s)/product(s)*
- *Immunization program*
- *VBP registered and audited operations*

FALL LAUNCH

BIXS will have what is being described as a "soft launch" this September. Thomas is looking for about 50 interested "and patient" producers to register on BIXS just to try out the software and reporting system and provide feedback on how well it works — point out any snags or weaknesses. After that trial run, and any subsequent adjustments, it will be available to all producers by mid-fall.

(FILE PHOTO)

BIXS gives producers the option to display very basic info such as birthdate as well as detailed production practices.

The BIXS system is being designed to work with both highspeed and dial up interest service, and initially it will also be available on a compact disc (CD). To register, the only two pieces of information a producer needs to provide is his or her Canadian Cattle Identification Agency (CCIA) account number and their Premise I.D.

Once registered, they are urged to read the terms and conditions required as a user of the BIXS system, and then they need to create their user I.D. and supply their email address.

The two basic pieces of information needed to register cattle on the system is date of birth (and that can either be actual birth date, or the beginning and ending dates of the calving season) and whether the ranch has participated in the Verified Beef Production (VBP) program.

Beyond that the producer can enter a range of optional information on their cattle. "It is optional, but it is good to remember the more information you can provide the more useful it will be down the road," says Thomas. "Providing optional production, performance, animal health and other data can benefit producers as other sectors in the production chain (i.e. feedlots and packers) search BIXS for cattle to fit certain specifications.

"The potential of BIXS in helping the industry better market cattle, as well as ultimately produce higher quality cattle is tremendous," says Thomas. "It is free, it is confidential and it creates a whole realm of possibilities for creating business arrangements between producers, feeders and processors."

Cow-calf producers will need to provide calf birthdates as well as indicate whether they've participated in the Verified Beef Production (VBP) program. Optional information, which all helps in the marketing and "search" process could include breed/cross, colour, castration date, brand/location, dehorn date, details on the vaccination program, parasite control, and more.

Feedlots and backgrounding operation will be providing basic information such as the date cattle move into the feedlot, weight, move out date, finished weight and VBP information. Optional information from feedlots could include, average daily gain, vaccination protocols, implants, details on antibiotics, the animal health score assigned each animal, feed type, feed conversion and more.

Packers and processors will be providing basic reports on slaughter date, individual animal hot carcass weight, carcass yield, quality and fat grade data. Optional information could include yield percentage, ribeye area, lean meat, electronic grading data and more.

It is a crawl, walk, run process that has all participants starting with basic reports and then hopefully the amount of information available will increase over time.

BIXS will provide the reports on its website, but it will be up to producers to decide how to use that information, says Thomas. The system will provide some benchmarking services so a producer can see how his or her cattle are doing compared to industry averages. Producers may want to enlist the services of an I.T. company or other beef management specialist for help in analyzing the data and implementing production changes.

Thomas, who has been explaining BIXS to all sectors of the beef industry in recent months, says there is wide support for the concept, although there are also some skeptics.

"As with anything new there are going to be people who don't want it to succeed, and for various reasons," he says. "And yes, we are aware some are spreading less than factual information regarding BIXS — it's classic fear mongering. But beef industry people are more than able to separate the fact from fiction and grasp why someone might be slamming BIXS. They will judge for themselves how beneficial BIXS can be for them and their business."

For more information on BIXS visit the Canadian Cattleman's Association website at www.cattle.ca and click on the link to Canadian Beef Advantage; or contact Thomas at (403) 275-8558 or by email at: canadianbeefadv@gmail.com

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