

Grass for Generations

By Kristine Tapley

With cattle markets falling, optimism in the industry can be trying. The beef industry has been struggling to retain and attract new producers while the average age of farmers, at 54, keeps creeping up. The next generation of cattle producers might be looking for something different from their career and potentially for good reason.

The Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (CRSB) released the National Beef Sustainability Assessment and Strategy this fall. This assessment gathered great detail from the Canadian beef industry from the three sustainability pillars: environment, social and economic. The Canadian beef industry garnered top marks in most categories; however, producer viability was a weak link in the system. According to long-term average margins, a cow herd of 200 head provides a total annual income of \$17,559. Statistics Canada states this will not support a family and is below the low income cut-off. This causes 75 per cent to 84 per cent of people in the cow-calf sector to rely on off-farm employment.

How do we ask young people to invest themselves in the cattle industry when they will likely be overworked and underpaid? We need to find ways to bring profitability back into our industry if we want to keep cattle production sustainable.

According to 44 per cent of producers surveyed by the Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association, the largest barrier to entry in the cattle industry is access to land. Across the country land values increased by 10 to 22 per cent every year between 2011 and 2015. As a young producer myself, I can attest to the woes of competing for hay and pastureland with other industries. Like many others, I moved further north and on to marginal land, but also further from my off-farm job causing even more strain on my time and energy in establishing myself in the cattle industry.

Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) also has a vested interest in the sustainability of the beef industry. DUC recognizes that forage and grasslands kept in the hands of cattle producers who manage these areas are productive for cattle and wildlife alike. A sustainable beef industry is critical to the retention and health of grasslands and wetlands. In fact, the CRSB assessment indicates that although the beef sector only accounts for 33 per cent of land that is in agricultural production, it provides 68 per cent of the wildlife habitat.

DUC's Revolving Land Conservation Program is a tool that allows ranchers to access pastureland in a less competitive market. Land purchased by DUC has the wetland and upland habitat restored and then secured by a conservation easement on the land title. The land is then put back on the market and available for purchase by anyone looking to buy grass. Essentially, it eliminates potential buyers interested in converting the uplands to grain or removing the water from the land. Both DUC and beef producers see the need for grassland landscapes to be managed by ranchers for generations to come. It is our hope that programs like this that keep pastureland growing grass will create more accessible land options for beef producers while benefitting the sustainability of the beef industry.

DUC has a great deal in common with the beef industry. DUC believes a thriving and sustainable beef production system is essential on the Canadian landscape to continue growing more grass and protecting clean water. Opportunities that create and improve programs that stimulate this growth and the success of the beef industry is a key focus.

For more details on the Revolving Land Conservation Program visit:

<http://www.ducks.ca/resources/landowners/revolving-land-conservation-program/>

Find the National Beef Sustainability Assessment and Strategy here: <http://crsb.ca/our-work/sustainability-benchmark/>

Kristine Tapley is the regional agrologist – beef industry for Ducks Unlimited Canada. She can be reached at k_tapley@ducks.ca or at 204-857-2377.