



By Mike McMorris, BIO General Manager
mmcmorris@biobeef.com • www.biobeef.com

VOLUME 2 • ISSUE 4



You Give... You Get

We've all heard about the dog that wouldn't know what to do with the car if he caught it. We all want carcass data but what will we do with it when we "catch" it?

I have a really old book in my office called *"Making Money from the Soil"*, published in 1915. In 1914, dairy producers in Canada were measuring milk yield and butterfat to the decimal place. They knew what they were paid for and they sought to improve their production to be more profitable. In the roughly 100 years since then, both milk and butterfat have tripled! In 1914, the beef industry focused on breeds rather than individual animals. Galloway were "noted for a hornless head, the result of cultivation" and the tagline for Hereford's read "as a milker it does not excel, but in the market shop it is good beef". Neither description is objective nor likely reflective of profitability.

What has the beef industry focused on in the nearly 100 years since that book was published? We now have many new breeds but many of those breeds are trying to be the same. We certainly have seen genetic change but have we seen much genetic progress? Certainly not to the extent of other livestock species. The poultry industry for example has taken the feed to gain ratio of chickens to well below 2:1. With feed being the biggest cost of production, efficiency has increased dramatically. Efficiency on the farm affects prices in the store and those prices affect consumption. Canadians eat a lot of chicken now.

Some say that carcass data is the holy grail of the beef industry. Others say that raw carcass data is rubbish, dangerous even. I say that both are half right. Carcass data will finally allow the beef industry to get serious about producing the right product. Only, we haven't yet defined exactly what that is. With retailers and food service pleading for smaller cuts, we have been listening to other signals as carcass weights continue to rise, with many now over 1,000 pounds. There are efficiencies in larger carcasses and we have developed new ways to cut the muscles but still, is that the best solution? Our grading system gives us yield grades but over 80% of the fed cattle processed in Ontario fall into two yield categories. That doesn't do much

to sort the best from the worst! There can be well over \$200 in value difference between two carcasses both in yield grade 1. Clearly we need to identify superior animals and pay for them accordingly.

There is very encouraging work underway to finally get carcass data flowing back to any owner of animals and sires of those animals. This is one of the possibilities that national identification offers. The Canadian Cattlemen's Association is leading the development of a Beef Information Exchange System (BIXS) and has had encouraging signs of cooperation from packers. Also encouraging is the commitment by the Canadian Beef Grading Agency to implement full instrument grading. Instrument grading involves the use of cameras to take a great deal more measurements on each carcass than we currently do, allowing more accurate estimates of lean yield, down to percentage points.

Carcass data will only be provided for those animals that have basic cow/calf and feedlot information recorded. Simply put, "you give...you get". Our new bioTrack system provides an easy and secure spot for you to both give and get. It allows you to view and benefit from information even if ownership of the animal changed. Over time as the data builds, we will be able to generate genetic evaluations (expected progeny differences) for carcass traits, in addition to the genetic evaluations that we already provide. While some raw carcass data will be useful (in cases of retained ownership for example), it will be important to take several factors into account in order to make meaningful comparisons of breeding stock. For example, this would include adjusting marbling or carcass weight based on the type of feeding program.

There is a pilot program underway now involving about 600 calves sold through the Keady Sales Barn last fall. Many industry groups (OCA, OCFA, Calf Clubs, Cargill, CCIA, OnTrace and BIO) are working to collect and make information available within the bioTrack system. We are well-positioned in Ontario to get a jump on other provinces when it comes to capturing and connecting information, including carcass data! You can help to position your own business by using bioTrack to get on board. 