

The Canadian Luing Cattle Association



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NEWSLETTER

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In spite of it all, we're still raising Luing

Message from the President

Jeff Longard



You may notice, as you peruse our little newsletter, that a name or two among the contributors rings a bell. Perhaps you've seen the acerbic comments in newspapers and farm journals from some of our members regarding

the current deplorable state of the industry. We are outspoken about the unjust concentration of marketing power and the relatively helpless position into which the primary producer is hemmed from all sides: escalating input costs, dependence upon agri-chemicals, packer monopoly and packer livestock ownership — in short, the almost insurmountable challenge of making a living as a cow-calf producer.

In spite of all this — which sounds to some like futile whining, to others like a threat to their untenable greed, but is in reality intended as a constructive critique of the status quo and a plea for fairness to the farmer — we continue in the business of raising cattle. Oh yes, we could argue that it's a lifestyle choice, or that off-farm labour supporting the on-farm drain is a "risk management strategy", or that we're holding on in hopes that the cattle cycle, the U.S.A., the government or some other magical agency will make it all right. We have heard, and probably used, all these arguments, which don't pay any bills. The hobbyist can perhaps justify his expenditures and losses in this way; the farmer or rancher must run a sound, sustainable business.

So why are we still in this? Changes are needed and we are trying to be part of them. It is true that it's a hard way to make a living, but we have found that with Luing cattle it is at least *possible!* I am certain that, had I not discovered the Luing breed several years ago, cattle would be no more to me than a bitter memory. When I first put a Luing bull on my cattle, I was amazed at the immediate changes: tight range of birth weights, virtually 100% unassisted birthing and suckling, consistent calf conformation, higher livability and resistance to health problems, an increase in profitability (in honest terms, a switch from annual net loss to annual net income) ... I soon went to



Luing grazing contently in coarse swamp grasses

purebred Luing and the results were even that much better.

I was convinced that Luing was the wonder-breed. It is not. There have been challenges and

struggles, joys and heartaches with this breed as with any breed, as I quickly learned. The superiority of the Luing is *relative*, based on rather simple and common-sense principles. That is, it is not superior to a Charolais in the south of France or to a Bonsmara in South Africa. It is just a matter of its suitability to Canadian ranching conditions, for which it has been bred, that makes it so practical and generally more



With many breeds, Canada thistle is an invasive weed requiring expensive chemical treatment. With Luing, it is a nutrient-dense feed.

profitable. An animal with a thick winter coat is proven to be more efficient than a smooth-coated warm-temperate variety. A cow that happily eats hemp nettle, Canada thistle, willow, and swamp grasses is going to be more economical than one that requires groomed pastures, Grazon and extensive feed and mineral supplementation. A cow that births and suckles her calf without any help, giving it that vital shot of colostrum, is going to raise more healthy beef than the one who doesn't know how to give birth to a calf that doesn't know how to stand up (unless, of course, you're a fancy purebred breeder of one of the popular "maternal" breeds and can afford closed-circuit television, heated enclosed barns, claiming pens and a lot of time and labour). A beef animal that can thrive on grazing nine months of the year is going to pull far ahead of the one that can just manage on five. Yes, Luing do all this. They don't do it by magic, they won't do it if you calve in January and stick them on bare unmanaged pastures, but under any reasonable scheme of management they will do remarkably better than other breeds *relative to the conditions of Canadian ranching*. And so, in challenging times, we're still raising Luing. ✓

The Canadian Luing Cattle Association Annual General Meeting

will be held on August 28, 2010 at the Lochend Luing Ranch of Dr Bob and Gina Church, at Lochend west of Airdrie, Alberta. Bob Church was the driving force in introducing the Scottish Luing breed to Canada in the 1970s and 1980s as well as the one who directed the merging of the top Canadian Snowlander cattle into the herd. Visiting with Bob and Gina is always a delight, and this is also a great opportunity for non-members or anyone interested in Canadian Luings to learn about their history and development, as well as a chance to see representatives of the various bloodlines extant in Canada. Breeders are reminded to have their membership up to date. The annual general meeting will begin at 1:30pm. Please contact Dr Bob Church at 403-208-3747 or the Secretary Mr Iain Aitken at 403-843-0094.

LUING CATTLE FOR SALE

HERD DISPERSAL: Bob Jamieson is dispersing his small herd of pure (unregistered) Luings by private treaty. The herd is located north of Cranbrook, B.C. on the route of numerous truckers hauling cattle regularly to Alberta. There will be 8-10 cows aged 4-9 years old and 2 or 3 bred heifers all due to start calving March 1 2011 to the Luing bull. This is an opportunity to acquire some select cattle with hardiness and foraging ability. They summer on rough pasture and usually graze until January on the Kootenay River bottoms. Contact Bob at 250-422-3322 or by email at bjamieson@cintek.com for further information.



What future Canada's grazing lands?

Luing Association secretary **IAIN AITKEN** suggests rethinking Canada's land use policy...



Land use in my area of west central Alberta has undergone considerable change in the nine years since I moved here. Rimbey traditionally had a reputation as a hay growing area due to our dependable moisture. With the reduction in cattle numbers and exodus of working farmers and ranchers a lot less hay is now grown for sale. There has also been an increase in acres growing annual crops, largely by our Hutterite neighbors. This has left one category of land in surplus – pasture, especially bush or other pastures that are incapable of being hayed or cropped. A lot of this land is now owned by people who are not directly involved in agriculture. Many of the owners have given up agriculture to work in the oilfield, others have retired and a few are new land owners from the city seeking a home away from the rat race. This has presented me with opportunities to expand my operation without owning more land, but it seems I am the only one still keen on running cattle! There

are several pastures completely un-grazed in the area and with fewer cattle in the country it looks like this trend will continue. With the low profitability and high risk associated with cattle ownership in recent years it seems no-one is prepared to rent these pastures and buy cattle to stock them. I have read countless articles in grazing management circles that advocate skilled grazers externalizing the risk of cattle ownership by grazing someone else's cattle on a custom basis. This may have been a smart short term solution but it was clearly unsustainable – it relies on someone else being prepared to own cattle after you have decided you can't afford to own your own.

If market forces were to prevail, these conditions should cause the rental price of pasture to tumble until it reaches a price that tempts entrepreneurs back into the business. Unfortunately, many of the landowners are not prepared to reduce the price they ask, and with their off farm income they can afford to leave their land idle. With a hungry world can we afford this waste of resources?

Recent data I saw indicated that of the 6.6 billion world population 1 billion people are defined as hungry (taking in insufficient calories for daily living). In addition, another 1 billion people receive enough calories but are malnourished due to micro-nutrient shortfalls. Some of these food shortages are the result of political instability and wars but most are created by population distribution, drought, erosion and other extreme weather conditions. Whether you believe climate change is a man-made phenomena or a naturally occurring one, it seems clear that the world is experiencing more extreme weather conditions than it has done in recent history. Coupling that with an ever increasing population the number of hungry people in the world does not seem likely to decrease in the decades ahead.

At the current time nearly 40% of the global grain supply is fed to animals. This is equivalent to the

annual calorie needs of more than 3.5 billion people! I have also seen it quoted that 70% of the grain grown in North America is fed to herbivores. I am certainly not a proponent of a vegetarian solution to feed the hungry world, but at the same time I can see merit in that viewpoint. While pigs and poultry cannot practically be produced without the use of feed grains, cattle, sheep and goats certainly can. It is said that due to slopes or soil type, 45% of the world's land surface is unsuited to growing crops – it surely makes sense to maximize the production we can get off this type of land by grazing it with herbivores? Nothing can convert free sunlight, water and forages into



high-quality protein as efficiently as a self-propelled, self-replacing, four-legged harvester! Why then are pastures ungrazed in some of the best grass-growing areas of the country while irrigated land in Southern Alberta capable of growing human food crops is growing grain for the feedlot production of cattle?

At the moment, it seems that our cattle production system is largely based on winter calving herds (January-March) producing weaned calves to go straight into the feedlot in the fall to be finished in late spring/early summer the following year. The smaller and younger part of the calf crop are often back-grounded then pastured before heading into the feedlot the following August. Would it not make more sense on a resource basis for most of the cow herd to calve later, once the winter weather has passed, and be prepared to background and pasture most of the calves for a second summer? Most of the feed going into the yearling animal up until it entered the feedlot, and all the feed going into the cow, could then be forages rather than grains. One thing that has perhaps restricted the use of summer pasture for grazing yearlings is the distance and expense involved

trucking them to pasture for a short hundred day grazing period. I think we need to find ways to keep the growing calves in the area they were born until they are ready to enter the final feedlot finishing period. I realize this would be reversing the trend of recent years that has seen cattle concentrated in the feedlot alley corridor of Southern Alberta. The driving force behind the feedlot expansion was adding value to grains and ramping up the beef export industry. Looking at the average feedlot profitability figure of *negative \$4.85 per animal* over twenty years (1980-2000), it is clear this has not been a very successful business model!

If this weren't a serious enough misuse of productive cropland, we have a worse use happening – growing cereal crops for ethanol. The idea that we can grow crops to turn into low-grade fuel and perpetuate the SUV culture is bad enough in a hungry world, but the proposition goes from the sublime to the ridiculous when the process is revealed to be a net energy loser. There are conflicting studies on the efficiency of ethanol production, but most suggest that more finite fossil fuel is used to produce ethanol than the energy contained

within it. Some more comprehensive studies calculating the energy consumed by industrial agriculture from the production of fertilizer, machinery, transportation and processing costs of all the parts suggest that as much as six times the energy is expended as is captured in the final product.

What we really need is a global political solution that will allow the hungry to have access to food and agricultural producers to earn a sustainable return for their endeavors. I think this could be done – we simply have to ensure that the middlemen in the production system that control the seeds, fuel, machinery, transport, fertilizer, chemicals, processing and retailing are not allowed to pocket all the profits, leaving governments to use taxpayer dollars to continually bail out primary producers. It seems this is not a new problem as Theodore Roosevelt summed up the solution rather neatly in his early 1900s quote: **“I believe in corporations. They are indispensable instruments of our modern civilization; but I believe that they should be so supervised and so regulated that they shall act for the interest of the community as a whole.”**✓

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Directors:

Mr Iain Aitken, Secretary • Blacketlees Farm • RR#4 • Rimbey, Alberta • T0C 2J0
Ph/Fax 403-843-0094 • www.luingcattle.com

Mr Jeff Longard • Mr Paul Galbraith • Mr Wilf Chele