

COVID-19

We know our readers depend on Alberta Beef Magazine for timely, relevant information on all the most important issues impacting beef production. Right now, one issue has pushed everything else to the sidelines: COVID-19. The pandemic is changing our daily reality at breakneck speed. So how does a magazine – which at the time of writing is four days from going to press and about 10 days from hitting readers' hands - provide relevant and timely information to cattlemen about a subject that continues to change from hour to hour? We looked for answers the way cattlemen have across fence lines, in feedstore parking lots, and over mugs of coffee (though we recommend from a 6' plus distance!) for generations: we started with a conversation. What we heard from our industry leadership – that we're in this together, that the cattle industry is pulling together to provide the answers cattlemen need, and that we WILL come through on the other side – will stay relevant no matter what COVID-19 throws at us in the days and weeks ahead.

Teamwork in a time of crisis

COVID-19 had been simmering in Canadians' consciousness for some weeks but became suddenly real for most Canadians during the second week of March 2020. On March 11th, the World Health Organization labelled COVID-19 a pandemic. Within a week, schools were shuttered across most of Canada; the term 'social distancing' became part of our common language; government leaders started announcing local and provincial states of emergency. Meanwhile, within just two days, the cattle industry pulled together a crisis management team made up of key representatives and staff from national and provincial cattle associations.

"The cooperation between all groups in the cattle industry has really been remarkable," says Dennis Laycraft, executive vice president of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association. "It's at a time like this that you really see the benefits of the collaboration we've built through the National Beef Strategy."

Lead by CCA, virtually every cattle industry group is involved in the united effort, from national organizations like Canada Beef, the National Cattle Feeders' Association and the National Livestock Markets; to provincial cow-calf and feeder organizations; to industry groups including processors and transporters.

"Basically, the whole industry has come together," says Janice Tranberg, president and CEO of both the Alberta and National Cattle Feeders' associations.

For maximum efficiency, the crisis management team named working groups to manage specific priorities, including transportation, policy development and communications.

"Our goal is to get key priorities met quickly," says Laycraft.

The coordinated response also includes ongoing involvement from various levels of government and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

"We're very pleased with the response from the Government of Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which is doing all it can to ensure trade continues to flow," says Laycraft.

Tranberg says a major push at the front end of COVID-19 crisis was to align messaging between cattle organizations.

“We need everyone to be saying the same messages and doing our best to get information out so that we can best help producers understand what’s going on, and so that we can ensure producers’ questions are being answered as best as they can,” says Tranberg. “There are so many different aspects to what is going on, right from how should people manage their farms, to what is going to happen with transportation or processing, to what happens with temporary foreign workers, which is a topic we’ve been working very hard to have government understand is a necessity. Now we’re turning our heads to what kind of assistance people will need to stay afloat.”

Among the biggest challenges the individual working groups and the overall crisis management committee face is coordinating all the aspects, priorities and perspectives of the many groups they represent.

“We have to make sure that, when you ask for something for one sector, it doesn’t negatively impact other aspects or other players,” says Tranberg.

Trade continuity

One thing all players prioritize is the vital necessity of ensuring Canadian cattle processing plants can continue operating despite the pandemic. Laycraft says keeping cattle flowing was job one when the crisis management team first met.

“CFIA has done a terrific job of focusing on business continuity,” says Laycraft. “That includes working to make sure people are available to get certificates to export beef and live cattle, and working closely with the US, which is where most of our live exports are going.”

Though the pandemic is forcing Canadians to adapt to an unprecedented speed of change, Laycraft feels confident that the movement of product and livestock across the Canada/US border should remain in place.

“We’ve been assured our ability to import and export live cattle is in place,” he says. “They can’t make absolute assurances, but I feel very positive about the emphasis they are putting on business continuity and prioritizing resources. We’re literally talking to CFIA and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada every day or every second day, and to the Meat Council and industry partners as well, and we very much feel that our priorities are being heard.”

That said, the bigger question mark may be how many people are ultimately impacted by illness.

“The issue that could come down the road is if we start to see a shortage of inspectors,” he says.

“Hopefully with all the biosecurity work we can maintain safety in the workplace. The one thing that is a positive is that packing plants prioritize hygiene.”

Purebred Auction Sales

One of the biggest issues Alberta Beef Producers’ board chair, Kelly Smith-Fraser, is currently hearing about from producers is purebred bull sales. With social distancing now very much in effect across Canada, public sales in packed auction marts are no longer possible.

“This is like purebred producers’ harvest time. They’ve essentially spent two years planning and preparing for their bull sale, and now it’s changing. It’s just like having a crop of canola in the field, having your combine serviced, being ready to turn on the key and someone tells you that you can’t turn on that machine. I’ve been getting a lot of questions from purebred producers saying: What do we do? How do we go forward?”

The Canadian Beef Breeds Council, CCA, and the Livestock Markets Association of Canada published a “Recommendations for Canadian Cattle Sales” factsheet March 19th of in-depth recommendations for those hosting or attending cattle sales during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the well-publicized recommendations (hand washing, sanitization, social distancing protocol, etc.) that apply to any public gathering, the fact sheet recommends producers: offer in-person viewing the day before the sale and/or online viewing to reduce traffic on sale day; offer phone or online bidding options; restrict general public access and limit attendance to 50.

“The priority is to offer your customers options, whether that’s phone bidding or online options or having your animals displayed the day before so people can come through and look when there aren’t lots of people around,” says Smith-Fraser.

For buyers, the fact sheet recommends: the now-common hand washing and social distancing; viewing bulls ahead of the sale and/or phone or online bidding; only sending one person per farm operation; and perhaps most notably, only attending sales if you have the intention to purchase or are seriously considering purchasing.

“We just need buyers at the sales,” says Smith-Fraser. “We all like to support each other at sales. We’ll often go to sales to be a face in the crowd to build momentum. But what I’m hearing from producers is: if you’re not coming to buy, please just stay home and watch online.”

Smith-Fraser says the few bull sales she’s heard about to date have actually gone quite well.

“There’s a lot of uncertainty and people aren’t sure whether they should go to sales or host sales, but the ones I’ve heard about so far, things have been right where they should be. Prices are holding their own.”

The pandemic may even be a force of positive change, thinks at least a few tech-savvy families.

“I just saw on Facebook a posting from one family that was quite excited. Some of the younger generation has been trying to convince the older generation to have an online sale for years. It took COVID-19 to finally convince them to add an online option,” says Smith-Fraser. “Yes, it’s a change, but it is do-able.”

Messages to producers

What are the biggest take-away messages from talking with the cattle industry’s leaders?

#3) Every day and during pandemic, we’re lucky to be in agriculture.

“I’ve been isolated at home calving cows since the beginning of March. I’ve been to town about twice since March 5th,” says Smith-Fraser. “Compared to other industries, agriculture is in a pretty good position.”

#2) COVID-19 is real

“The #1 thing we all need to do is take the health concerns seriously. On farm as well as in industry, we have to ensure that we’re following good hygiene practices. We’ve heard it a million times: Wash your hands. Take it seriously if you’re sick,” says Tranberg. “The quicker we can get over the hump of this, the quicker we can get back to normal.”

#3) We will get through this

“In the short term, I know it’s scary for everyone. But industry is doing the best we can and consumers are buying our beef,” says Smith-Fraser. “I feel confident in the market. I feel confident in our consumers. It’s going to be okay.”

“Ours is a resilient industry,” says Laycraft. “We will get through this.”

A big thank you to Dennis Laycraft (Canadian Cattlemen Association’s executive vice president), Janice Tranberg (president and CEO of both the Alberta and National Cattle Feeders’ associations) and Kelly Smith-Fraser (board chair of Alberta Beef Producers) for making time to talk to Alberta Beef Magazine. Each is pulling long, long hours to manage the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, and each immediately responded to our request for a chat, despite being bombarded with countless similar calls from media, producers and industry partners. We applaud these individuals and their organizations’ commitment to open communication, especially in this time of uncertainty.