

Start off with an interesting story about a fellow with some really good numbers. This fellow raised some calves off of a group of Angus and black brockle faced cows that would make anyone proud. The calves were born in March and sold in October with many of the steers weighing 700 pounds at that time. The cows were relatively small weighing less than 1200 pounds and the sire of the calves was full French Charolais. In fact full French Charolais raised by my father.

The year was 1969. Almost 40 years later, I wonder where this industry has evolved.

Cow weights have risen and carcass weights have risen, mostly due to selection from this major shift to size that the exotic cattle brought from continental Europe and the fact that the breeds that were already in Canada forged ahead with goals to keep up. And I must say that they have succeeded.

Canfax reports talk of a 611 pound average steer carcass in 1975 and an 834 lb average in 2005. 854 average in the first week of Jan. 2006.

The furthest back that Canfax reports on cow carcasses is 1992 when cows carcasses averaged 606 pounds. 2005 saw an average cow carcass of 663 pounds. I think that we all have to admit that our cows are bigger than they were 20 or 30 years ago.

Have these numbers helped the producers of Canada become more sustainable? Has almost 40 years of addition to carcass weight truly helped producers? Numbers on feed conversion show that nothing has really changed. It still takes the same amount of barley in almost every breed to producer a pound of animal. I will say “animal” here due to the fact that bigger animals have proven their ability to gain more but ADG is relative to mature body size. At this stage I would like to point out that one of the breeds that I raise, the Galloways rank fourth in average daily gain, best on cost per pound of gain, and second on feed consumed per pound of gain, among breeds with 10 or more years of data from the Steer a Year trial right here at Olds college. Yet, none of us could resist the challenge to grow faster with the bigger breeds.

I know one thing, and that is we have used up a hell of a pile of cheap barley, and have helped the efficiency of packing plants that love to have carcasses that fit their line and don't waste their time.

We trust that they are looking after customer satisfaction which I question a bit when our sales people in our vertically integrated marketing program talk of where they want you to put your “cut in half” strip loin medallion steak?

We have proven to all that we can grow them big and grow them fast. Still no one group can say they are millionaires because of it.

Do we stay on this course, or do we find new ways to show that our industry is versatile. Net Feed efficiency is a way that I believe we can show not only versatility, but potential for profit, possibly greater than we have seen through increased carcass weight and growth rate over the last 40 years.

Heritability of .35 to .40 is as great as the heritability numbers for growth rate and size. This is what Net Feed Efficiency can provide. I will not go into the details of Net Feed efficiency as we have people here today who can explain it a lot better than I. Could you imagine though, a pen of steers that ate 10 bucks less feed to produce the same carcass.

From a purebred prospective, I can only speculate about the potential because I can see a good deal of time involved before this tool becomes effective in selling bulls. We are one of the first in Canada to use the tool, and remember it is only one tool we have to use. It must be used to select from cattle that have already been selected for things like fertility and structural traits.

That being said, it is the purebred or the fast growing hybrid bull industry (preference aside) that must embrace this tool if it is to become effective within the industry. We can test steers all we want, but the sires will bring out the heritability of the trait. The steers will identify the sires.

Once again, just like the coming of the continentals, the purebred producer will be expected to step up to the plate and shoulder most of the costs involved with preliminary Net Feed Efficiency testing. Olds college and the government of Alberta have assisted to date and I expect will continue to do what they can, but the bills will eventually be paid by the industry and the front line will be the Purebred or commercial bull producer.

I believe that this has held back producers from participating to date, and hope that more producers see the long term benefits, and government continues to help educate people to the benefits so the gamble taken by bull suppliers somewhat pays off in the not too distant future.

Net Feed Efficiency has the potential to raise income by lowering cost to producers and that opportunity does not come along every day. If we were to ignore this potential we would simply leave our competitors all over the world with a step up on us in production of beef. It's a competitive market out there and every little thing matters.