

Verification program is a good marketing tool

Record keeping, third party audits provide incentive to practice what you preach

by LINDSAY CHUNG

DUNCAN - Barrie Redl and his family own and operate Redl Ranch in 150 Mile House. They direct market Redl's Home-Grown Beef. Their cattle are raised without antibiotics, pesticides, herbicides, growth implants, added hormones, animal by-products or medicated feeds, nor are the cattle fed corn or grain. They also are part of the Verified Beef Production (VBP) program and during a presentation at the Islands Agriculture Show in February, VBP's BC co-ordinator, Annette Moore, used Redl Ranch as an example of how VBP can give producers the confidence to back up their marketing claims.

Redl Ranch sells its beef direct to customers and at six locations in the Fraser Valley. Moore says Redl Ranch has a binder full of photos which shows all aspects of life on their farm, and customers have access to all their records. This helps them tell the story behind their marketing claims and shows how they do what they say they do.

"He says you get everything from the Vancouver yuppie to the grandma who's very concerned about antibiotics because she's on certain drugs and is fearful, and he tells her everything," said Moore, whose presentation focused on marketing claims such as "no hormones" and "no antibiotics."

"They may not recognize the [VBP] logo but knowing it's there and that they see it, Redl says brings a level of confidence that you can't buy.

He's only been on the program a short while and he's noticed a big difference already."

VBP is a national on-farm food safety program developed by the Canadian Cattlemen's Association. Not all producers are antibiotic or hormone free and the program recognizes that. What the program does is verify the process farmers are practising. Record keeping is key.

"All the VBP program is doing is providing you the tools to enable you to make those claims more confidently," she said. "It enables you to have a transparent program that you own and you have the ability to show if someone wants to question you ... because it is an unbiased third-party auditor who comes and views your practices."

There are varying levels of "no hormones" and "no antibiotics" - from no, not ever in the animal's lifetime to routine vaccinations. Which level you practice depends on who is buying your beef.

"There are varying levels, and the key is to know who you marketing to," said Moore. "Don't take it lightly if you're going to be making those claims."

VBP is one of several auditable programs available (100% BC Beef, Canada Organic and SPCA Certified are others) and they all help producers substantiate their claims. The programs examine farming practices, on-site conditions and record keeping. This way, they can back up the claims that participants are, for example, hormone-free. Over an eight-

year period, VBP provides an on-site review, three record assessments and asks producers to do self-declarations.

"We primarily focus on on-farm food safety, so things like antibiotic use and application, and pesticides," said Moore. "You're certainly allowed to use those products but we ask that you use them according to the label or on the advice of a veterinarian so you have substantiation on the claims you're making and that they're recognized and tested through that."

Important factors for being able to prove the level of hormones or antibiotics a producer does or doesn't use include excellent biosecurity levels, a solid herd health plan, knowledge of risks, forage management, reliance on good-quality feed and nutrition, water access and quality, and maintenance of animal health.

Through programs like VBP, record keeping is key because that provides a heads-up when something needs to be dealt with.

"You catch trends a lot faster and the quicker you can identify a problem, segregate it and clean and get them going, the less chance it will spread through the rest of the herd," said Moore. "If the goal



The face of the Verified Beef Program in BC, Annette Moore says the program helps producers identify (and fix) problems quicker. (Cathy Glover photo)

is no antibiotics and no hormones, then your health management plan becomes paramount.

"The level of management that is out there in the industry now has far and away exceeded what I saw at the beginning of my career. Over time, we've really improved our management practices

and the application of [antibiotics] is far less than we used to use. But at the same time, though, stuff does go through and things happen."

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