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Canadian 'verified sustainable' beef is still on the menu

McDonald's headline-grabbing pilot is over, but the effort to boost the cattle industry's environmental and welfare credentials continues

BY ALEXIS KIENLEN
AF STAFF

It won't happen in a hurry, but the effort to create a Canadian 'verified sustainable' beef brand is moving along and will reach an important milestone by the end of the year.

When McDonald's Canada ended its groundbreaking sustainable beef pilot project last year, the torch was passed to an industry initiative called the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (CRSB). While the goal remains the same — bolstering consumer recognition of the industry's environmental and animal welfare credentials — the process is a long one, said the roundtable's executive director.

"In talking with our friends in Fisheries and Forestry, this is typically a five- to three-year process," said Fawn Jackson, who is also manager of environmental issues for the Canadian Cattlemen's Association.

"McDonald's helped speed that up incredibly, but there is still work to be done."

Part of that is finalizing the "indicators" — specific rules governing things such as environmental standards, treatment of animals, and other social licence issues. The indicators for farms have already gone out for public comment.

"We're working on our indicators for processing facilities, and we'll be putting those out for public consultation in the spring, as well as developing an assurance manual," said Jackson.

The assurance manual is the rulebook that includes details such as the audit and verification cycle, qualifications of auditors, and record-keeping guidelines.

A second key task of the roundtable is something called a "sustainable beef framework" — the beef industry version of Ocean Wise for seafood and Sustainable Forest Initiative for lumber.

"If someone wants to supply or someone wants to source verified sustainable beef, this is the framework they can utilize to do that," said Jackson. "While we won't let perfection get in the way of progress, we're also going to get it right. Making sure that we have something that is robust, that is economically viable for producers, and is meaningful is our main priority."

The framework covers a host of specific details, such as what happens when ownership or care of an animal changes as it moves from farm to processing plant, and how the sustainable beef initiative dovetails with programs such as ProAction on the dairy side and VBP (Verified Beef Production) Plus for beef cattle.

"If producers are on those programs already, they would essentially qualify for verified sustainable beef," said Jackson.



'Verified sustainable' certification may one day join the iconic mountain shot as a selling point for Canadian beef. PHOTO: CANADA BEEF

"That does require making sure that all of our indicators match up and all of our assurance protocols match up and all those types of things."

A pair of committees is working on the framework and it's expected to have it ready for launch towards the tail end of the year. Although the end result will be similar to McDonald's pilot program, there will be many small changes and improvements, she said.

"Of course, you learn things in a pilot and there were things that they (McDonald's) recommended that they would change. It was great to have those learnings, but they were very robust, and I think they will be quite close."

Although they're not calling it a second pilot project, the roundtable will be testing its revamped set of indicators this spring and summer. A number of producers who signed up for the McDonald's pilot project will be trying out the new verified sustainable beef framework indicators. Producers can also sign up for the indicator trials by going to the contact section of www.crsb.ca.

Participation in the verified sustainable beef framework is voluntary and produc-

ers who have been through the McDonald's pilot project will be grandfathered in. The cost to participating will be similar to programs such as VBP Plus.

The big question is whether going through the process will pay dividends for producers.

Numerous participants in the McDonald's pilot said the process was not onerous (largely consisting of documenting things they already did) and that the audit process helped them make their operation more efficient. But there was no premium for producing beef for McDonald's and it remains to be seen whether retailers or others will use the framework to create beef brands that command higher prices.



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FAWN JACKSON

"I think we have yet to see the full economic story of verified sustainable beef," said Jackson. "I think there is a lot of potential, but our job as the CRSB is to make sure the framework we develop is robust, but economically feasible for the entire supply chain as well."

The roundtable is also involved in a biodiversity project in collaboration with Cows and Fish, the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, Alberta Beef Producers, and MULTISAR (short for Multiple Species at Risk — an organization that works with landowners to protect grassland species and habitat).

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CORRECTION

A story in the Jan. 16 edition (*Bid to raise beef checkoff 'on hold'*) incorrectly stated that in 2015-16, Alberta Beef Producers directed \$9.8 million of the national checkoff collected in this province to Canada Beef, and \$1.3 million to the Beef Cattle Research Council. In fact, ABP allocated \$2.7 million to Canada Beef and \$680,000 to the research council.