



Handling cattle: Think like the world is watching

Whenever Ontario beef producer Dan Ferguson handles cattle on his 70 cow operation he gets a lesson in a fundamental reality of beef production today. “Everyone is watching.”

Located a little over an hour east of Toronto, he’s



surrounded by acreages, and many weekend urban farmers. “I get access to more hay and pasture properties,” he says, “but I have to be a lot more transparent. My handling facilities are next to the side road, so whenever we handle cattle, people stop and watch. I have neighbours who phone and ask when we are processing so they can come over and watch.

“You can’t say no to them; they would suspect we are hiding something. They want to know what you are doing, where the needle goes and why. You have to be very confident you are presenting them with a product image they are going to feel comfortable picking up and taking home at the retailer.”

Family run, average size

Ferguson’s operation is typical of a lot of smaller operations, certainly in Ontario, but also across the country. The 70 female cow-calf operation is about provincial average. It’s family run and supported by off-farm jobs.

“Team Ferguson,” as he likes to call his family crew, are the labour supply. That includes his wife and business partner and their four children, from late teens to their early twenties.

“I like the word team,” he says, “but in sports terms I am also the first to admit that Team Ferguson does not always have its game face on. Sometimes things just don’t go the way they should,” he says.

That’s why he believes the Verified Beef Production (VBP) program is a lifesaver for operations like his, because of the support and templates it provides for managing everything from herd health to shipping.

“When I as a senior member of the family call out an order to the rest of the family on handling day, they may not always listen. But because we have a written document, everyone is in charge because everyone can read for themselves.

“If that is the protocol for shipping and this is the manifest that needs to be filled out, and these are the

things to be checked everybody just reads that and does it, including the trucker who picks them up. He really respects that manifest in the shipping side of things.”

Chart your course

Part of the lesson from VBP workshops is to be prepared and chart your course before you’re doing the hands on part of it, says Ferguson. That way you don’t have to be thinking on the fly.

One of the facts of our business is that a lot of people have off-farm jobs. So when you get people and the cattle together, you want things to go as smoothly as possible.

With VBP, you can see ahead of time exactly what you need to get the job done. You can go to the vet clinic in advance and get the product in advance so it’s at chuteside and you’re ready for the job at hand with the people you need.

“At our place if we’re doing a herd health day where we’re processing cattle, everybody knows there are written instructions and everybody can keep a cool head in these circumstances. It’s nice to be guided by the document that we’ve set out for the process that guides you for that operation on that day.

“I think that’s one of the key strengths of this program. It creates an attention to detail, so if someone has a short temper, is having a bad day this helps keep the whole process on track.”

Other benefits

Having those records and management processes written down often also make it easier when applying for various programs and being prepared for services such as national traceability. “We’ve found by having records and documentation to back it up it’s less stress on producers and the system to get up to speed,” he says.

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