



Standards drive this expanding national beef operation

Jim Martin gets a window on innovative approaches on Ontario's Manitoulin Island

This is cattle country. At least in Jim Martin's view that's what the numbers would tell you about Ontario's Manitoulin Island. While Ontario's overall numbers have varied substantially with land prices, droughts and feed grain prices, the Island cattle numbers have held fairly firm.

Martin, the cattle manager at a new enterprise in the region, the Blue Goose Cattle Company, is a long-time resident and big time believer in the Island cattle economy. The arrival of Blue Goose and a new abattoir about to open are two reasons for even more enthusiasm for the region.

Blue Goose is a B.C. based operation based on strict production standards producing what the company describes as a "clean protein." The product is organic with a focus on environmental and animal care practices. The pasture-to-plate production process culminates in a branded beef product.

Growth plan

The plan for the Northern Ontario operation was to have 400 cows and finishing all the offspring, says Martin. But it is more likely the program will be much larger, perhaps as many as 1,000 cows. Product would be moved mainly to the greater Toronto area.

A new abattoir is a key part of the puzzle. Built as a not-for-profit corporation by 50-plus local producers, it is designed to handle about 20 head a day at maximum capacity but more likely

will see about 40 head a week. Financial support also came from the Ontario Cattlemen's Association, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food's Rural Economic Development program, FedNor, the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation, several local municipalities, and one First Nation.

For so many years we have had to move cattle off the Island to process them, says Martin. "Now we can process the cattle locally and we are not that far away from a market of five million people."

VBP role

All of this, says Martin, fits well with Canada's Verified Beef Production Program (VBP). On farm, Blue Goose has a cattle identification system that tracks all vaccinations and health records. VBP complements the organic process, he's found.

"Most organic certification programs have some specific audit standards, but the VBP program fits well," he says. While some organic certification starts when calf reaches finishing period, VBP goes right from day one of an animal's life.

"When you are VBP audited you can say to potential consumers we've done the highest standards we can do on farm voluntarily. VBP says it's on paper, and in our case, every staff member has participated in a VBP workshop."

With four staff, communications is important. The operation uses handwritten records, and staff are trained in their responsibilities. "We review things bimonthly with everybody and with some of them monthly," he says. "One of the best things about the VBP program is that it is so user-friendly. It's not that it is too simple, just that it is in cattle friendly terms."

Consumer first

Martin believes most producers understand that the consumer expects us to be doing these things.

"It's not something we need to paid extra for. Producers know when they shop themselves that they expect certain things have been done, that the product is brought to the retail as safe as possible."



Ontario's Jim Martin is heading up a value chain geared for Toronto markets, using VBP as base for production standards.