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Cattlemen

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CCA'S NEW PRESIDENT

Brad Wildeman — Lanigan, Sask.

The importance of communication

Q & A

with Brad Wildeman

At their annual general meeting in Ottawa this month the Canadian Cattlemen's Association elected Brad Wildeman as the new president. He replaces Hugh Lynch-Staunton of Lundbreck, Alta., who takes the post of past-president. Wildeman is president of Pound-Maker AgVentures Ltd., a 28,500-head capacity integrated beef feedlot and fuel ethanol facility east of Lanigan, Sask. Wildeman has served as foreign trade chairman with the CCA and more recently as vice-president. He and wife Cheri and children Taylor, Reagan and Brock live at the Pound-Maker feedlot.

As has become our tradition with in-coming presidents of the CCA, CATTLEMEN sat down with Wildeman recently to learn his views on some of the major issues facing the national association and the beef industry.

Q) What is the primary job of the CCA at this point in time?

A) Our industry has been through some very trying times throughout these past five years or so, and the stress of all these challenges has left the industry bruised and somewhat divided. I think we need to develop and articulate a plan that can unite cattlemen with a single strategy for the future. And we also need to present a clear path forward to governments as well, who have been inundated with various individuals and groups that have presented all sorts of alternatives to "fix" our industry. This only confuses policy-makers and impedes our ability to create a partnership with governments in achieving common goals.

I think there are four key steps in this strategic plan: creating business risk management programs that work for our industry and don't exclude key stakeholders in our business; fix our regulatory framework to allow cattlemen to compete with other beef-producing countries; create a production system that incorporates food safety assurance, sustainable practices, and

information sharing throughout the chain; and, develop a focused and aggressive market strategy.

Q) What has been the greatest weakness of the CCA during the BSE crisis?

A) When you get into events like BSE, it doesn't matter how prepared you think you are on crisis management, it is never enough. Our leadership at that time did an outstanding job of reassuring consumers that our beef was safe and we kept consumer confidence in the early days. That was a critical success.

But no doubt our communications efforts were insufficient to meet the needs of the grassroots cattle industry that were desperate for information about what we, as their representatives, were doing to get them through the crisis. We found out that in a rapidly evolving situation, constant and inclusive communication is critical. And many stakeholders equated the lack of communications with secrecy. I personally know that wasn't the case, but I understand the perception others may have had. We need to correct that, and have taken significant steps to strengthen our communication efforts.

Secondly, the CCA is a national association comprised of a cattle association from each province. It had served us well historically to depend on the provincial associations to lead the communications efforts. But when this critical time came, we discovered that the industry had higher expectations of CCA than just to represent its member organizations. Other key stakeholders, like lenders, marketers, packers both nationally and regionally, and others all looked to CCA to carry their views forward. And many organizations wanted to be involved in policy development within CCA that were not members in the traditional sense. Additionally, CCA's decision making must be viewed from the perspective of what is the best for the entire value chain, on a national basis, over the long term. This doesn't always allow for regional interests or



sectoral initiatives; even though they may be legitimate, to become CCA policy unless they meet that test. In the future, we will continue to have policy decisions decided by the board of directors made up from our member organizations, but we have developed a process through the Industry Leaders Committee to allow others to contribute to CCA's policy development process. The best policy comes from thorough debate evaluating all the alternatives, and this process should help us do that.

Q) What has been the CCA's greatest success over that same time period?

A) As I said previously, the ability to not only maintain consumer confidence, but also have consumers rally to support us was our greatest accomplishment. Who would have ever dreamed of the "beef rallies" that occurred all over Canada in those early days, and marketers scrambling to advertise Canadian-only product?

Secondly, regardless of how much some of the financial programs that were announced were criticized, it got the industry through the crisis without a mass slaughter of animals that many feared was inevitable in the early days. It is pretty easy to manage backwards, but given the rapid response required, I think the end result was better than most predicted.

We also have proven to government decision-makers that the industry is an important and responsible contributor to consult with in developing policy. And while we continue to be frustrated with various policy decisions that are

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made, I think we have proven that our advice is accurate, and to ignore it usually exacerbates the problem. Through our work on BSE we now have established producer advisory committees on international trade to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and to CFIA on policy issues and trade irritants. This closer collaboration should improve accountability, resulting in better policy and regulations down the road.

Q) What do you see as the top skill you bring to the job of president?

A) We have a tremendous team of dedicated and passionate people working for us in our CCA offices. They love this industry and are dedicated to working tirelessly for the betterment of the industry. And we have a committed and thoughtful board of directors; all of them elected cattle producers from across Canada. And while we may have regional differences and issues, they have always been committed to the well-being of the industry nationally. My role is to continue to encourage that enthusiasm, provide the clarity of direction, and to ensure they have the resources they need to get the job done.


Personally, I would like to think

that I am a consensus builder and can see issues from someone else's point of view. I learned much of this from previous successful leaders in our industry, and developed it through my work during BSE. I like to seek out alternative positions before making up my mind.

And I try to look at our industry in the longer term. I think it is easy to get caught up in the immediate problems of the day, and I have worked on most of the big ones over the past five years or so. But while we have to recognize and deal with the immediate issues, we have to resolve them in a way that gets us closer to our longer-term goals. If we don't know where we are going, then it is impossible to make the right decision in the short term. And I am not scared to stand up for our industry when the need calls for that, and to work for solutions that work, not just those that are popular.

Q) What will the beef cattle business in Canada look like two years from now at the end of your term?

A) I think a lot of that will be determined over the next six months or so. We have a number of events that will occur in this time period; Issues like the R-CALF vs. USDA legal case on Rule 2; COOL legislation and the U.S. Farm Bill, Canada-Korea FTA and WTO trade talks that will affect beef access, and most importantly another crop year that will determine grain and feed costs. Depending on the outcome the industry could change significantly. But I believe in the axiom "high prices always cure high prices" and so I am confident the economics of beef production will swing back in our favour.

But my hope is that if as an industry we are prepared to embrace the changes I spoke of earlier. In two years we will be in the active process of building a stronger industry. An industry based on solid market principles; providing our customers with a value proposition that no other competitor can match; on an aggressive marketing strategy and increased access to our most important markets based on OIE guidelines; and utilizing a platform to share valuable information throughout the entire production system, allowing our cattlemen the tools for constant improvements in the future. History has shown that this is a resilient industry, populated by committed people, so I am confident about the future. 

Upcoming 2008 Bull Sales at Bow Slope Shipping Brooks, AB.

Tues., March 11: Countridge Red Angus Bull Sale,
1 p.m.

Thurs., March 13: Loewen & Guests Charolais Bull Sale,
1 p.m.

Mon., March 17: Fraser Total Performance 2-Year &
Yearling Hereford & Black Angus Bull Sale, 1 p.m.

Tues., March 25: 29th Annual Bull's Eye Hereford Bull
Sale, 1 p.m.

Sat., March 29: Acadia Ranching Charolais & Black
Angus Bull Sale, 1 p.m.

Tues., April 1: Top Grade Yearling Red Angus Bull and
Replacement Female Sale, 1 p.m.

Tues., April 19: Triple X Red Angus Bull Sale, 1 p.m.

Sat., April 26: 11th Annual Beasley Ranching Black
Angus Bull Sale, 1 p.m.

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