



Beef Talk

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The future of beef involves labor issues

A new challenge in the beef industry is finding a labor force that can help producers get their work done when the tasks need to be completed. Cow-calf operations seldom gave much thought to not having labor in the past because in most locales there seemed to be a labor pool for hire.

That list of talent is dwindling. The net result may affect rural communities in many ways.

Labor was one of seven issues identified by the Farm Foundation as it partnered with private and public organizations to take a look into the future of animal agriculture. In the final report,* Peter Goldsmith and Philip Martin noted that “Animal agriculture is undergoing fundamental change, driven by new production technologies, changing consumer demand, genetic improvements, new retailing pressures and globalization.”

Goldsmith and Martin stated, “Production has shifted from independent operators to larger production units” and that these newer

units “... largely bypass community linkages.” For the most part, in beef country, these larger production units still are independently owned, but the ramifications are the same.

Labor needs change and the skills of today’s workforce are much more extensive. On one hand, the need is simply more people to keep cattle moving during a very brief period of time and performing tasks such as cattle sorting, feeding and seasonal general chores. The operation on the next day is faced with a need to have people to interact with a very dynamic, fast-paced, technology-savvy supply chain that feeds into backgrounding lots, feedlots and meat packers.

Given the vast assortment of needs, the erratic nature and spot times for any particular expertise, and the overall lack of availability of people, finding labor is a growing challenge. The ability of an individual, independent owner keeping up on all the ins and outs of the business is almost nonexistent in today’s beef production chain.

Who gets the work done?

A minor slip, a misplaced note or a simple lapse of thought can cost money. Not only do producers find themselves stretched to physical limits, but the mental limits also quickly surface. In today’s frantic-paced business world, a mental slippage — in contrast to reaching one’s physical limitations — may go unnoticed, but mental mistakes can have significantly greater effects on the bottom line.

So who steps up and gets the work done? There are three common choices. Do the work yourself, hire local people, or seek to encourage an outside workforce to become involved. The first two ideas are the current applications that don’t seem to be working because of the out-migration of the workforce.

Alternative solutions have not always been evaluated. Often in those areas already affected by depleted population, the operation simply chooses to sell out. To remain viable, the beef industry can survive and grow by creating opportunity, resulting in an immigration of people.

The third choice will bring a new diversification of people to the area. This would expand the resident population along with the need of the community to meet the demands of a growing population, something most rural areas are not accustomed to at all.

Unfortunately, these new jobs may be low-paying and have the potential to change the composition of the population, giving rise to potential conflicts. But for now, the need is known.

The plan is ... well, let’s put it this way: I’m not sure there is a plan that effectively repopulates the West.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0329.



**In “Community and Labor Issues in Animal Agriculture,” published by the American Agricultural Economics Association’s online Choices magazine (www.choicesmagazine.org, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2006).*

Editor’s Note: *Addressing the past, present and future state of the beef cattle business, “Beef Talk” is a weekly column distributed by the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Agricultural Communication office. Ringwall is executive secretary of the NDBCIA, director of the Dickinson Research Extension Center and an NDSU Extension beef specialist. An archive of columns can be found at www.BeefTalk.com, and your comments are always welcome.*