



Alpena, Mich., producers Jim and Claudia Chapman use the North Country Beef Producers to explore new markets for their cattle.

Working Together, Looking Ahead

Michigan producers make the best of losing their TB-free status by forming a group that turns problems into opportunities.

Story & photos by
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When deer hunters were successful on a northeast Michigan hunting preserve in September 1997, they probably had no idea their trophies were about to turn Michigan's cattle industry upside down.

Those deer, positive for bovine tuberculosis (TB), ultimately meant the state was about to lose the TB-free status it earned back in 1975. Now all herds in an 11-county TB zone have to be tested every year. And each animal in that zone has to test clear to move off the farm.

As for cattle from any area in Michigan going to another state, "The cattle have to meet certain requirements," Michigan State University (MSU) Extension veterinarian Dan Grooms says. "Depending on what state, those requirements may range from expensive and difficult to almost impossible."

Needless to say, the cost of doing business, especially for herds in the TB zone, has increased. Producers could either call it quits, which some did, or make the best of it. With the encouragement of MSU Extension Beef Specialist John Molesworth (now retired), others chose to form the North Country Beef Producers (NCBP).

"His premise was not to combat TB but to continue to market our cattle and open up new markets," says Jim Chapman, Alpena producer and president of NCBP for the first four years.

"Dr. Molesworth saw the NCBP as a way to turn TB into an

opportunity instead of a problem," says Mio cattleman Marty Galbraith, second and current president of NCBP.

Molesworth's original idea was for NCBP — made up of around 40 cow-calf producers — to finish and market their own beef. MSU grant writers helped the group get the money for a feasibility study on a backgrounding, feedlot and harvest program.

"If we own and feed them out here, we don't have to ship feeder cattle out of the TB zone," Galbraith says.

"In reality, we found out from the study we are too small to make it work," Chapman says, "but at least we know that now."

MSU beef specialists also invited the group to finish cattle in an MSU research project for two years in a row. "That kept the membership going," Chapman says. "We had 100 head in the feedlot the first year and a few less the second time."

"We made a little money," Galbraith says. "But the biggest thing is we learned how that end of beef production works. We learned about grids, yardage and feed conversion. And the ones who don't want to continue to feed cattle at least got carcass data from their herds."

"I'm not in that group," he adds. "I do want to feed out cattle. But we're a little nervous this year because of feed prices."

Group effort

There are also the tours — the car caravan to Iowa and the bus trips to North Dakota and Kentucky and Tennessee. In Kentucky, their main purpose was to visit with producers

in the Barren County area who have made a name by group-purchasing inputs as well as marketing together.

"In that group, they agree to agree or they're out," Chapman says.

The NCBP producers borrowed the idea of group purchases and now buy their baling twine and minerals together. "Twine is \$38 a bale in town," Galbraith says. "I buy it for \$30 a bale."

In addition, they are working with members of the West Branch Feeder Calf Association on vaccine purchases.

Then there is the networking. "Dr. Molesworth was forever dragging us to Lansing to meet Extension people, rural development specialists or lenders," Galbraith says. "This summer I got a call to come to Detroit to meet with two U.S. senators to have input on the Farm Bill. How often does someone from the TB zone get to do that?"

Plus, since cattle producers are scattered out in the northern part of the state, he says the monthly meetings are valuable just to get to meet other people in the same type of business.

"We're getting to know each other," Galbraith explains. "Everybody does something a little different. If you have a problem on your operation, more than likely somebody else has already figured it out. Or they might know where to get a good deal on barbed wire."

He says the group's diversity is also an advantage. Even though the majority of the members are commercial cow-calf producers, they also have purebred breeders, an ABS representative and feed suppliers.

There are also the speakers they invite to their monthly meetings —



Mio, Mich., producer Marty Galbraith says the NCBP is a forward-looking group of producers.

Extension specialists, veterinarians and marketing specialists. They help the group members look at their options.

Galbraith comments, "We have to have EID (electronic identification) tags for our cattle, because we're in the TB zone. We still haven't been able to capitalize on them for marketing, but they can only help."

There is one thing the members of NCBP don't do, however, and that's spend time on the thing that brought them together in the first place. "You don't get a bunch of guys standing around and moaning and groaning about TB," Galbraith emphasizes. "It is one positive, forward-looking bunch of guys."