Winter Beef Schools Address Current Issues

The Situation
It can be difficult for beef producers to stay current with issues associated with the beef industry. Not only do they need to stay up-to-date on improved production practices, but they are often faced with crises. Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) was diagnosed in the USA in December 2003 which closed the beef export markets, shook consumer confidence in beef and concerned producers, veterinarians, and government officials. Tyson Fresh Meats closed their Boise plant in 2006 which impacted the local feeder and finished cattle markets. High corn and feed prices have squeezed profitability out of the beef industry. Wolf predation on livestock dramatically increased as wolf packs expanded into our area. Ranchers need help to resolve their issues through education, research, and adaptive management.

Our Response
A successful partnership with the Weiser River Cattle Association has been developed to conduct a large multi-county beef school in conjunction with their winter business meeting. Speakers included University of Idaho Extension specialists and educators, Idaho State Department of Agriculture officials, veterinarians and allied industry personnel. Production topics included calf delivery techniques, bull selection, winter cow nutrition, trace minerals, grazing management, alternative feeds, and wolf predation. Animal health topics included calfhood vaccinations, proper injection sites, calf scour treatment, bio-security, new products, Johne’s disease, BSE, and the National Animal Identification System (NAIS). Marketing topics included value pricing, economics of feeding cattle, private labeling, developing brand names, and Beef Quality Assurance (BQA). To enhance learning, engaging teaching methods that were used included: (1) autopsy of a calf to show the results of improper vaccinations, (2) using a mechanical cow for participants to practice identifying calf position and proper delivery techniques, (3) demonstration of vaccine handling, administration and correct inject sites, (4) electronic ear tags, readers and proper placement of the tag in the ear, and (5) visual and taste comparison of Choice, Select and Standard quality beef ribeye steaks. Adams/Washington county beef schools are designed to provide area producers with up-to-date information on these critical issues from expert speakers.

Program Outcomes
Fifty-five people attended the beef school in 2000, 47 in 2001, 40 in 2002, 85 in 2003, 60 in 2004, 92 in 2005, 112 in 2006, 123 in 2007 and 93 in 2008. Ranchers expressed appreciation for the information that resulted in less death loss and more calves to be marketed. The following topics were cited by producers to be most beneficial: (1) using better
techniques in calf delivery or knowing when to seek professional help, (2) preventing scours or using more appropriate treatment for sick calves, (3) proper handling and administration of vaccines, and (4) developing bio-security plans and procedures to prevent disease introduction.

Ranchers indicated an increase in knowledge of BSE, foot-and-mouth, and Johne’s disease after attending the beef school. The NAIS program for trace back of diseased animals was presented and premise registration was encouraged (48 registered at meeting). Seventy-seven producers became BQA certified which will decrease bruising and injection site blemishes and increase beef quality. Several ranches feed and market 5-25 head of beef annually directly to consumers. A group of ranchers are investigating the feasibility of a Weiser River label with Idaho Preferred®.

Wolf issues are being addressed by proper reporting, cooperation with the U.S. Wildlife Service and Idaho Fish and Game, complying with Endangered Species Act (ESA), and encouraging removal of wolves from the ESA protection.

A wolf-cattle interaction study is progressing where wolves and cows have radio collars that transmit movement data to a computer via satellite or record the data for future retrieval. Hopefully, the wolf predation problem can be resolved.

The Future
Many issues are ongoing and need further education and discussion. Producers need updates and training in Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) to receive and maintain certification. The University of Idaho Extension will continue to partner with the Weiser River Cattle Association to conduct educational beef schools to address current issues identified by advisory groups.

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