

# VBP HELPS KEEP BEEF IN THE GAME

No one has to participate in the verified beef program, but consumers and the food industry are starting to call the shots



**L**es Johnston figures if he wants to continue to sell beef, and hopefully tap into top or higher-value markets, he needs to be able to show buyers as well as consumers he is doing a good job.

The southern Saskatchewan rancher is a believer in the Canadian Verified Beef Production (VBP) program. He was doing much of the record-keeping and following beef production practices spelled out in VBP long before the program was ever created. As the fourth generation on the family farm at Fillmore, south of Regina, Johnson says keeping and analyzing records and following sound production practices, just

became a way for his family to produce a higher-quality, more efficient, more valuable animal. The Verified Beef Production program fit right in.

“To me as a producer, the value of all this is about maintaining and hopefully increasing market share,” says Johnston. “It doesn’t matter if you are producing beef, or selling cars, or lawnmowers, you need to produce what the customer wants. And it is a lot easier to sell a person something they want, than to try and convince them they need your product.”

In today’s beef market, increasing consumer

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LES JOHNSTON

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concern about animal welfare, food safety and proper environmental stewardship, and competition with other meat and vegetable protein sources makes it vital for individual beef producers to demonstrate they are following all the best production practices. It doesn't help for a producer just to know themselves they are doing a good job, says Johnston, they need to demonstrate it.

Johnston, who is also a VBP workshop leader in Saskatchewan, says the majority of Canadian beef producers do a great job of producing beef now. So it's not much of a stretch to formalize their routine beef production practices through the VBP program. Canada already has a livestock identification system in place — every animal has a tag and number. A key aspect of the VBP program is to keep proper records. Most producers today have smartphones, most have computers — useful record-keeping tools. VBP also supplies a handy pocket recordbook for writing down various treatments.

### **PROPER RECORDS ARE KEY**

Key information for the VBP program, includes proper records about when animals are processed, what vaccines or antibiotics they receive, and how the products were administered — proper injection methods.

“This is something I've done for probably the past 20 years,” says Johnston, flipping back through a recent notebook where he jotted down any days when he has worked with cattle — for his own information when, where and how many cattle were moved to certain pastures, notes on when cattle were processed and treated and what products were used. No animal that has been treated with antibiotics, for example, leaves the farm until it has passed the treatment withdrawal date. That's all very similar information that the VBP program recommends.

Over the years Johnston developed a 200-head herd of both commercial and purebred Simmental cattle. The farm started out with straight commercial cattle. In the 1970s, Johnston's father started looking at using A.I. to improve herd genetics and performance. As that program developed they began to market good quality crossbred bulls and replacement females. Eventually it evolved into two separate herds of purebred Simmental and good crossbred females.

And keeping good records just became

an important management tool, he says. Genetic information, calf weights, proper herd health treatment records, market information, feedlot performance data and carcass data (when available) all became useful information on their farm in helping them produce a more efficient beef animal and a high-performing beef herd — on both the purebred and commercial side.

“And proper records do pay off,” says Johnston. “You can analyze information and make better management decisions, but we just had a recent case of dealing with an Ontario buyer looking for cattle with specific production protocols. We were able to explain our production practices and back that up with our records, and within a couple hours the deal was completed. Proper management practices and good records can help you access new markets.”

### **LONGTIME SUPPORTER**

Throughout his farming career, Johnston provided input into the development of the national identification program, also helped develop the Canadian good management practices — which eventually became the Quality Starts Here program — and was an early adviser to and advocate of the BIXS (Beef InfoXchange System), which is a two-way information exchange through the beef production and marketing chain from producer to processor.

He sees these all as tools that help him improve his own beef production practices, ultimately producing an efficient and high-quality beef animal, that meets the ever-narrowing specifications processors and retailers are looking for in Canadian beef.

Nearly a decade ago, the original Quality Starts Here program morphed into the Canadian Cattleman's Association Verified Beef Production program, which not only encourages producers to use proper production practices but verifies it. Farmers and ranchers do it, and a third-party audit verifies it.

The original VBP program walks producers through standard operating procedures in key areas such as animal health management, feed and water, cattle shipping and handling, pesticide control, manure management, and proper on-farm training and communications of these procedures. The most recent version of VBP is called VBP+. Along with the above practices it also brings in other modules covering increasingly important beef production procedures such as on-farm bios-

security, animal care and environmental stewardship.

### **TWO-STAGE VBP PROGRAM**

The VBP program is a two-stage, work-at-your-own pace program. The first step: a producer gets trained in the VBP program. In many cases they can attend a local two to three-hour workshop explaining the program (it can also be explained online). From there they can work through the program and manuals at their own pace. Once they have gone through the material and begun documenting production practices with proper records, the second step is to call for a farm audit. That involves an on-farm visit by an independent beef industry auditor to have a look at the operation, review records and ensure production practices are in place. VBP operates on an eight-year cycle. The program requires one full on-farm audit along with an annual assessment, which is either a records review or a self declaration. All farms are open to a random audit at any time.

In some provinces, registering for VBP program also qualifies a producer to access federal and provincial cost-sharing funds under the Growing Forward 2 program. It can help cover the cost of some materials and equipment related to VBP requirements such as extra restraints for cattle squeezes such as neck extenders, head and shoulder holders; help with the cost of record-keeping software; and cover half of the cost of the full \$500 on-farm audit.

### **IT'S ABOUT STAYING IN BUSINESS**

While completing the VBP program does require some time, Terry Grajczyk, national program manager, says many producers are already well on their way there — it is just a matter of formula-izing the record-keeping practices they are already using. “And many producers over the years have already participated in on-farm food safety, environmental farm plans or other programs,” says Grajczyk. “And much of the work they've done there can just be rolled into VBP.”

Both Johnston and Grajczyk say there is no threat to complete the voluntary VBP program, but there is a reality.

Grajczyk says demonstrating or “verifying” practices about proper animal care, good environmental stewardship, and proper biosecurity and food safety protocols have always been important, but are becoming even more important in terms of

“maintaining a social licence and protecting our ability to farm,” she says. “Many aspects of the VBP program are low cost or no cost, other than taking a bit of time. But it demonstrates leadership in the beef industry. And leadership simply means being aware of what can be done, doing what’s right and helping those who don’t know to pull up their socks when they need to.”

Johnston says it is about staying in business. “Markets and consumer (retailer) trends are changing,” says Johnston. “Over the past 20 to 30 years the Canadian beef industry (with limited budgets) did very little to market itself to consumers. We relied on retailers and restaurant chains to tell consumers about the quality of Canadian

beef. And now we are seeing some restaurant chains, retailers and competing protein sources that are raising doubt in the minds of consumers — “should I be concerned?”

“As beef producers we have to get behind any initiative we can that not only helps us to improve our production practices, but also shows the world we are doing a good job,” he says. “The Verified Beef Program goes a long way to meeting the objectives of the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef. And a sustainable beef product is something that consumers, retailers and the food industry are interested in. The Canadian beef industry has had tremendous support from restaurant chains such as McDonald’s restaurant for years.

McDonald’s is the largest customer of Canadian beef in Canada, but they want a quality product from a sustainable industry. I predict the day will come anyone not producing beef under the VBP program won’t be able to sell to McDonald’s, and other retailers will follow.”

For more information on the VBP+ program visit the VBP website at: [verified-beefproductionplus.com/](http://verified-beefproductionplus.com/) where you will also find links to provincial VBP offices and co-ordinators. 🍁

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