Sustainability and Canada’s Cattle Industry

Canada’s beef producers caring stewards of the land

For Canada’s 83,000 beef producing families, caring for the land is what they do 365 days a year. Sustaining the land is essential for their business to survive and Canadian beef producers are proud to be stewards of the land around them. Many cattle producers’ develop environmental farm plans that help them utilize good management practices reducing the environmental footprint of Canadian agriculture.

Using land that would otherwise be unproductive

In Canada, nearly one third of our agricultural land is unsuitable for crops, but is suitable for grasses which are used to raise grazing livestock and support wildlife. This more than doubles the land area that can be used to produce food in Canada. Cultivating this land for food crops would destroy natural habitat and impact wildlife. By practicing good grazing management producers maintain biodiversity and wildlife habitat on wild grasslands and prevent erosion on susceptible parts of cultivated land. Planting grasses on vulnerable cultivated land prevents wind and water erosion. Healthy grasslands also encourage biodiversity by providing a natural habitat in which native plants, insects, birds and wildlife can co-exist and thrive alongside cattle. Pastureland also has the ability to “store” carbon, so it isn't released into the air.

Managing the environment along rivers and streams

Cattle producers make it a priority to maintain water quality, wildlife habitat and cattle productivity. Cattle are fenced out of the most sensitive areas. Producers take other measures such as fencing “buffer strips” to ensure healthy shoreline vegetation, which in turn filters sediment and provides wildlife habitat. Often solar powered pumps are used to move water into troughs giving cattle clean fresh water and discouraging them from walking into the streams.

Continuing to decrease the carbon footprint

As part of the digestion process, cattle produce the green house gas methane. These emissions from cattle vary with feed quality and digestibility. As the quality of the feed increases, emissions per pound of meat produced decreases. In Canada the quality of feed and pastures exceeds that of most other countries. In fact, Canadian scientists have estimated that GHG emissions/kg live animal weight decreased from 16.4 to 10.4 kg of CO₂ equivalent from 1981 to 2006. Selective breeding has led to cattle that are very efficient in feed conversion and that minimize green house gas emissions. In Canada in 2010, transportation was the source of 28 per cent of total Canadian greenhouse gas emissions, while the all Canadian agriculture was responsible for 8% of Canada’s green house gas emissions. (Source: Canada – National Inventory Report - Executive Summary, Page 4)