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Quebec veal gets a boost from Ottawa



The federal government has announced a loan of \$2.7 million dollars to the Quebec-based milk-fed veal company, Écolait. With the Slaughter Improvement Program has brought some relief to Canada's beef industry, most producers agree that improving Canada's meat processing plants is by no means their top priority.

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Andrew McClelland
Advocate Staff Reporter

One of Quebec's major players in the livestock industry was given a shot in the arm from the federal government last month. Under the "Slaughter Improvement Program," Ottawa announced a loan of \$2.7 million to assist Écolait a Quebec firm specializing in the slaughter and processing of milk-fed veal calves.

Minister of State for Agriculture Jean-François Blackburn made the announcement while at the company's veal slaughtering facility in Ste-Anne-des-Plaines, near St. Jérôme, Quebec.

"In this current global economy Canada must be able to rely on a strong and profitable red meat industry" said Blackburn. "This investment will help Écolait cut its costs considerably and improve its operations, which by extension, will help Quebec producers capture new domestic and international markets."

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capacity and upgrade its slaughterhouse plant technology," says Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Écolait produces up to 12,000 tonnes of meat per year, processing over 100,000 head of milk-fed veal calves raised by over 150 producers. Over the past 30 years, the company has emerged as a major force in the milk-fed veal industry, where it holds market shares of 61 per cent within Quebec and 68 per cent on a national level. The company employs 246 workers in Ste-Anne-des-Plaines, and approximately 100 more in Ontario, New York State and the province of Quebec.

According to Ag Canada, Écolait can play a major role in expanding market access for Canada's beef producers, as it exports half of its products.

"This federal investment will help the company achieve major savings which will help to increase the profitability of its plant and that of its partners," said the ministry in an official news release.

Troubles far from over

But while the announcement is good news for Écolait and the producers who raise its calves, some beef farmers are pointing out that renovating slaughterhouses will not make Quebec's livestock industry profitable in and of itself.

"It's definitely a step in the right direction," says Gib Drury, a cow/calf operator from the Outaouais region. "But because of our strict SRM (specified risk materials) regulations, we cannot be competitive with our US counterparts—and they end up taking a large part of our livestock south of the border."

Current Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) regulations stipulate that SRM tissues be removed from all cattle slaughtered for human consumption. That means Canadian slaughterhouses must absorb the cost of carefully removing the skull, brain, eyes, tonsils, spinal cord (and all nerves attached to the spinal cord) and eyes of cattle aged 30 months or older.

According to CFIA's "Enhanced Animal Health Protection From BSE" measures, a portion of the small intestine must also be removed from cattle of all ages. The US has no similar regulation for its beef industry.

"Building more slaughter capacity will not solve all our problems," argues Drury, a former president of the Quebec Farmers' Association. "We need to harmonize the regulations. At the moment, American buyers are not only taking our livestock and slaughtering them cheaper

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Like dreams, statistics are a form of wish fulfillment.
 —Jean Baudrillard

Let the truth be told—farming is a great life!

Ivan Hale

QFA Executive Director

Most farmers have a natural curiosity to know how our neighbours are doing financially compared to themselves. The downtime in the winter is a good time to gather information and analyse our options to expand or downsize, or to make changes to our types of production, or possibly even switch careers altogether.

Of course everyone's individual situation is different. Nonetheless, it is helpful to know how the agricultural sector is faring overall. To do so, let's look at some facts released last year by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Farm Data Analysis Unit in a report entitled *Financial Situation and Performance of Canadian Farms 2009*.

The detailed charts and tables illustrate the complexity and diversity of agriculture today. They confirm what we have been observing in our own communities. The trend is towards greater specialization. As well, farms also have many more sources of income than in the past. "Farm family well-being is now based on a combination of both farm and non-farm income and on the significant net worth of most farm owners," says the report.

Here's some of the highlights with my comments:

- Thirty years ago, the average farm in Canada was 511 acres. By 2005, it increased to 728 acres. This consolidation is causing a decrease in the number of smaller farms in Canada and smaller farms are being lost every year. The result is that the total number of farms in Canada dropped 28 per cent during the 25-year period 1980 to 2005. *Conclusion: Get big or get out.*
- The average debt per farm is increasing among all sizes of operations, but large farms are more likely to have farm debt. In 2007, large farms held 75 per cent of total farm debt. *Conclusion: Financial management skills are essential.*
- In 2006, there were approximately 229,000 farms in Canada of which 98 per cent were owned and operated as family farms. *Conclusion: The fear of agri-business wresting farm ownership out of the hands of families has not occurred.*
- Between 1981 and 2006, production increased by 27 per cent per person employed in agriculture, and more is produced by each farm. *Conclusion: Today's generation of Canadian farmers is very efficient!*
- Between 1990 and 2006, average gross revenues on Canadian farms rose 4.9 per cent per year, but the average annual increase in total expenditures during the same period grew 5.5 per cent. The result? Operating margins are declining. *Conclusion: Innovate and adapt to remain competitive!*

- By 2007, one in every four Canadian farmers were selling their products directly to consumers. *Conclusion: To increase income, farmers should actively pursue non-traditional methods of selling their products.*
- Farmers are taking keen interest in food safety and quality assurance programs. By 2007, 24 per cent of farms had a written food safety and quality farm plan. *Conclusion: Buyers and consumers have confidence in the high quality of products produced by Canadian farmers. BUT we must keep records or risk financial ruin if a problem arises.*
- During the 25-year period from 1990 to 2006, the average income of farm families increased 42 per cent to \$74,920, higher than the non-farm rural family and also higher than the average urban family. As well, the net worth of farm families is significantly higher than the net worth of the non-farm population. Ag Canada writes: “In 2005, the median net worth of farm families was \$691,000, while that of non-farm families and unattached individuals was \$148,000.” Note: Farm families are relying more and more on off-farm incomes. *Conclusion: By combining farm incomes and off-farm incomes, farm families are able to keep up with and even overtake the Joneses. Stop complaining!*
- In 2006, half of all farms were managed by operators 60 to 69 years old. They have the lowest debt levels and are not planning to expand. *Conclusion: A huge number of farms will be on the market in the next five to ten years. It’s a good time to enter agriculture.*
- In 2006, poultry, egg and potato farms reported the highest average net operating incomes, while beef, grain and oilseed farms and fruit and vegetable farms had the lowest incomes. *Conclusion: Is it too late to switch productions? Have I missed the boat?*
- Supply-managed sectors have stable and rising net operating incomes. The highest profit margin in 2006 was dairy farms at 18 per cent, with poultry and egg farms at 13 per cent. Between 1980 and 2008 the net operating incomes of Quebec farms rose slightly thanks largely to supply management. *Conclusion: Fight hard to protect supply management and cost-of-production pricing!*
- The regional variations in production affect farm incomes by province. However, in 2006 Quebec’s average net income per farm was \$44,600, second only to New Brunswick at \$46,900. *Conclusion: Quebec farmers benefit financially from being well organized and lobbying effectively.*
- “Even among farms of the same type and revenue class, some farms lost money year after year while others are profitable.” *Conclusion: This confirms your suspicions. Good management and attention to detail pay off throughout your farming career.*
- “In the past 10 years in Canada, average farm assets increased 38 per cent to \$1,455,000 per farm in 2007. Similarly, average net worth increased 41 per cent to \$1,189,000 in 2007. Note: Growth has been much more significant among larger farms.” *Conclusion: We’re getting ahead. Encourage young people to farm.*

- “The majority of Canadian farms are in a strong financial position.” Farm debt is small relative to total assets. Over 80 per cent can adequately service their debt and cover business costs. However, 36 per cent of hog producers are in tight financial positions. *Conclusion: The majority of farm debts are held by banks. They should treat farmers very well!*
- “Over time, greenhouse and nursery, and poultry and egg farms have had the highest returns and the lowest yearly variability”.

Facts like these don't lie. It's time for farmers to stop belly aching and complaining. Farming in Canada is a great life. We should be proud and encouraging youth to take up agriculture as older farmers prepare for a well-deserved retirement.

Quebec veal gets a boost

Andrew McClelland

Advocate Staff Reporter

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“Building more slaughter capacity will not solve all our problems,” argues Drury, a former president of the Quebec Farmers’ Association. “We need to harmonize the regulations. At the moment, American buyers are not only taking our livestock and slaughtering them cheaper in the US, they’re taking most of the good cows—the young ones and the meaty ones.”

Other beef industry leaders agree that measures must be taken to relieve Canadian cattle producers from the burden of SRM removal, either through a subsidy or by the US cattle industry adopting similar regulations. According to Brad Wildeman, president of the Canadian Cattleman’s Association, the nation’s packing industry must remain competitive or Canada risks losing it to the U.S.

“We need to find some financial assistance to offset the cost of the specified risk material ban which has cost them about \$32.00/head more than it does in the United States,” says Wildeman. “We need to get them some money in the short-term and we need to get the regulations changed to get them more competitive or we will have none.”

Program help misguided

While the federal government’s Slaughter Improvement Program is designed to increase the revenues and improve the operations of meat packing and processing operations in Canada, it has no component intended to ease the strain caused by CFIA regulations that are making it tough for

beef producers to turn a profit. Processing plants can submit business plans, and many are being approved since the recent October 2009 deadline.

However, cattle farmers like Drury say such help is somewhat misguided.

“They must do something about these non-competitive regulations; that should be a much higher priority,” says Drury. “They’ve definitely got the cart before the horse.”

On the trail of a killer coyote

Dogs and donkeys can ward off even the wildest of predators

Wendy Jones

Advocate Staff Reporter

Expanding cities and suburbs are slowly spreading further and further into the countryside—housing developments are springing up faster than grass can grow, converting fields and forests into a plethora of houses, playgrounds, dog runs and streets. Meanwhile, forests and wild areas are getting smaller and smaller. Those that remain tend to be squeezed between small towns and farmland.

Since farms are most often a source of food, scavengers and predators realized long ago that they didn’t have to limit their diets to what roamed the forest floor. Grain, meat, vegetables, fruits and grass are all abundant farm produce, and to farmers’ dismay, predators and scavengers have learned how to enjoy them!

“Young calves, lambs and poultry are the most common types of prey for predators in this area,” explains Pierre Yelle, a game warden for the *Ministère des ressources naturelles et de la Faune* (MRNF) in the Montérégie sector. “Coyotes, fox, racoons and weasels are opportunists that will strike and enter farm buildings as soon as you’re not paying attention.”

Other common predators whose presence is unwelcome by most agricultural producers include beavers and deer. “Beavers can damage forests and waterways within a few days. They often cause fields to flood and this can lead to crop damage,” he says. Yelle explains that it is best to contact a professional trapper if beavers are causing extensive damage to one’s forest, fields or waterways.

No shortage of deer

The deer population in southern Quebec has also increased notably over the last few decades, and as more deer are confined to smaller areas, food is becoming more scarce. They often move into orchards or fruit and vegetable fields where there is no shortage of things to eat.

“We want to inhabit the countryside, but we often find that the country inhabits us,” Yelle observes. “Many wild animal populations are becoming increasingly over-abundant and we find ourselves having to find different ways of dealing with nature without destroying it.”

Although farm producers are limited in the means they can adopt to deal with certain types of predators, there are a variety of methods that can be used to protect livestock and crops. In the case of deer, hunting without a valid permit during the regular hunting season is out of the question.

“Deer are just something that producers need to put up with,” says Yelle. Many fruit and vegetable producers have opted to install 10-foot fences around orchards and fruit gardens. In some cases, however, the size of the orchard can be a limitation due to the expense and the amount of work such a fence requires. There are also certain types of repellents that can be used to keep deer out of the fruit field or the orchard. The most common type used are either scent or odour repellents, or sonar repellents.

In the case of livestock predators, such as coyotes, weasels, fox and raccoons, there are various options available to producers seeking to protect their flocks or herds.

“If a farmer is having trouble with a predator, it’s important that he first take steps to try and stop the predator from doing damage. It may be a good idea to keep livestock confined in a smaller area near the barn, or to lock the animals inside a building at night,” Yelle explains. “If the problem persists and significant losses occur despite all efforts to discourage the predator, legally, the producer is in a position to eliminate it.”

Yelle suggests that a producer with severe predator trouble call the MRNF to discuss the problem. There are certified trappers available who will come to your farm and take care of the predators in question. Sitting out in the back yard with a rifle may be tempting, but is not the best solution, since there will always be more predators migrating around the countryside and turning up in your barnyard.

Coyote among sheep

Frank and Sue Liebrecht, from Sutton, Quebec have been in the sheep business for more than 40 years.

“Thirty years ago we were losing between 20 and 30 lambs a year,” says Frank. “It takes just one ‘killer’ coyote to get the rest of the pack started on the sheep and lambs.” Frank says that coyotes generally hunt smaller prey such as mice and hares, but that once they figure out they can hunt down a weak sheep or a young lamb, they’re very hard to get rid of.

Coyotes tend to be lone, quick and efficient hunters. Once they kill a sheep or a lamb, they will leave the rest of the flock alone while they eat their prey. Dogs, on the other hand, who have also been known to attack sheep, are very disorganized hunters. Instead of trying to single out one animal, dogs will often chase and traumatize the entire flock.

After years of unsuccessful fencing and scaring techniques, the Liebrecht's decided to invest in a guard donkey. Donkeys are known to bond with the sheep and then to adopt a very protective attitude.

"The donkey will stand between the flock and the predator," Sue Liebrecht explains. "If the predator approaches, the donkey will kick and bite, sometimes even killing the predator."

Keeping the flock indoors remains the easiest method of avoiding predator trouble for the Liebrechts. At their farm, all of the lambs are born indoors and remain indoors until they are sold.

"It's important not to tempt predators by letting the ewes lamb outside, or by leaving a dead sheep for the coyotes to scavenge. If you do that, then you're just asking for trouble," says Sue.

Great Pyrenees make great guards

At Trenholm Nelson's farm in Kingsbury, Quebec, near Richmond, another type of guardian watches over the flock. Nelson encountered severe predator trouble in the early 1990s and was losing 15 to 20 animals per year, with many gestating ewes reabsorbing their foetuses short term due to the stress induced by predator attacks.

"Donkeys didn't work for me and after a trip out west in 1995, I discovered the Great Pyrenees dog. I brought home a male and a female and I haven't looked back since," says Nelson. Great Pyrenees dogs, also known as Pyrenean Mountain dogs, are known for their guardian abilities and have been used for centuries to watch over flocks on the high borders of France and Spain.

Nelson now raises Great Pyrenees dogs on his farm and has had a lot of success with them.

"The dogs are born in the barn, they live with the sheep, they think like the sheep. It's important not to treat these dogs like pets because if they start to bond with humans, they won't do their job anymore; you have to treat the dog like a sheep," he explains.

According to Nelson, Great Pyrenees are very territorial and will stay with a flock continuously. He explains that any new noise or the sight of anything other than a sheep in the field will set off an alarm among the dogs; they will immediately respond by chasing off the intruder or barking.

"I haven't seen a coyote since I bought the dogs," Nelson notes. "But you have to be on guard and it's important to try different things to see what works for you. Coyotes are an ongoing problem—a huge problem—but there are things you can do. Personally, I'll keep my dogs!"

For more information on predators and what to do about them, visit the MRNF website at www.mrnf.gouv.qc.ca or contact your local MRNF office.

Until Debts Do Us Part

Robert Savage, Agronome, MBA

CEO

Solutions affaires experts-conseils

In the mid-1980s, Peter, John and Ray Dennison took over the family farm business. The transfer went smoothly and the new owners even signed a shareholder agreement, which included a detailed inventory of the assets of the farm along with a market value balance sheet. Almost two decades later, Ray began to feel the need to go solo and establish his own farm business. However, he soon discovered that, even though the farm was now worth ten times its original value, the owners had neglected to update the balance sheet. This meant that his share had remained frozen in time, at \$100,000 instead of \$1 million! Oops!

Amazingly, this unfortunate situation is common among incorporated farm businesses. Updating a business balance sheet often remains a pious wish. Why bother with more paperwork when there is plenty enough as it is? When, however, an unexpected death occurs, or when disagreements arise among business partners, family members or spouses, emotions can prove to be a major obstacle to agreement on topics such as the total value of the business that is about to be divided.

The avoidance of unpleasant and sometimes life-changing surprises is definitely one aspect of being in business. Ideally, the evaluation of your farm business should be done initially by qualified professionals specialized in the determination of farm assets. To do so, you could appeal to a chartered appraiser or to a mix of agronomes, rural engineers, accountants and farm equipment dealers, among others. Once this is completed, yearly updates can be done by the farm owners themselves. If partners do not agree on certain aspects of the evaluation, outside help may be required. However, if the partners are involved in serious arguments with respect to numerous aspects of the farm business, they ought to seriously question the health of the status of their relationship.

Your banker is someone who also might become very interested in knowing the value of your farm. If you have an investment project requiring a new loan, the banker will, among other criteria, base his/her approval on an up-to-date balance sheet. If, for example, a dairy quota, one of the easiest assets to liquidate, was worth \$33,000 in 2007, two years later, thanks to the ceiling price, the value of that same quota would have been reduced to \$25,000. For a 200 kg dairy farm, that represents an equity loss of \$1.6 million! Needless to say, your banker will take note of such details.

On the other hand, if your custom work revenues have steadily increased over the years and you have succeeded in building up a solid clientele, you have to evaluate, apart from the machinery and equipment, the resale price of your patrons' loyalty, commonly called goodwill. When, in November 2009, Wood's Snack Bar, an eatery in Ayer's Cliff that had, over the years, become an institution was demolished to make place for a brand new restaurant, everyone agreed that the famous building was worth no more than an order of fries. However, its clientele, anxiously

waiting for their favourite summer dining place to rise from the ruins, was the real incentive for reconstruction.

Regarding the Dennison farm business, fortunately for Ray, his brothers agreed to update and signed the revised balance sheet prior to Ray's departure, thus ensuring him of sufficient funds to start his own farm business. Their cooperation with their brother meant that Grandma Dennison still has the pleasure of gathering all her family together each Christmas Eve, and is completely unaware that it could have been otherwise.

Coming next month: *For sale: Profitable farm business with no succession*

Whether you intend to sell or buy a farm business, the adventure should not be based upon intuition or impulse alone. First of all, you should be clear about your goals. You may sell for less, and find yourself having a good business partner, thus maintaining your farm. You may, on the other hand, get your asking price, sell the business outright, and spend the rest of your winters in Florida! The choice may be tougher than it seems.

Having worked for over 16 years for various organizations—including the Caisse populaire Desjardins, the Office du crédit agricole du Québec and Farm Credit Canada—Robert Savage, founder of Solutions affaires experts-conseils, has established an innovated approach to farm consulting services. With the help of a multidisciplinary team of experts, Solutions affaires experts-conseils can get your farm on its way to greater profitability by working with your existing resources and having access to a network of professionals involved in agri-business.

News Clips

Sylvie Boutin
Communications Officer
ATQ

A “new look” in the ovine sector

Attention all ovine producers—when you receive your next order of ear tags, don't be surprised to notice that the electronic tags have a new look. In fact, since the beginning of the year, the female portion of the RFID tag for sheep has been changed slightly. It now has a black centre, which is perforated at the base to allow for better aeration. Since a picture is worth a thousand words, take a look at the photo showing both the old and new tags below!

FormClic: the free traceability software

To complete your traceability declarations faster and easier, we recommend that you use *FormClic*, the free electronic form software, available on our website at www.agri-tracabilite.qc.ca, which allows you to fill out the forms directly and transmit the information to ATQ on the internet with a simple click of your mouse. This software is compatible with most stick readers and also allows you to save all your data on your computer. No more paperwork!

Tag-reading tools

To save precious time, we would also like to suggest several different models of stick readers that allow you to quickly read your animals' electronic ear tags. These tag readers can record hundreds of tag numbers, which can then be transferred directly into the FormClic software and/or your flock management software. In addition to eliminating paperwork, this method also allows you to save a great deal of time!

Would you like to test a stick reader in order to make an informed decision before buying? Then check out our stick reader loan program, available at a very low cost (you pay only the shipping costs).

Smart tags...

To facilitate your declarations regarding new births, ear-tag installations and also to enter all the necessary information in one easy step, pre-programmed status tags may be used. These little "smart tags," which are never actually attached to the animal, allow you to automatically read the sex of the animal (using a male or female tag), as well as the date of birth, using a stick reader. Subsequently, all the stored data may be downloaded to your computer using the FormClic software program.

Upon request, a set of smart tags and a user's guide can be included when you borrow a stick reader from ATQ. If you already own a tag reader and wish to obtain a free set of smart tags, please contact ATQ Customer Service Department.

Access to site numbers

When you are preparing your traceability declarations, you must provide the site (premises) numbers of the animals' origin and destination. You may obtain these numbers, under certain conditions, by contacting the ATQ Customer Service Department.

Are you eligible?

In order to obtain the site numbers:

1. You must be officially registered in the ATQ database (i.e., a producer, sorting centre, slaughterhouse, auction, rendering plant, agricultural fair, etc.)
2. You must already know one or more of the following details: the name, telephone number, or address of the site operator for whom you wish to obtain this information.

Following verification of your identity, a search will be performed in the ATQ database to provide you with the site number requested.

Happy traceability!

Mortality Management 101

What are the disposal procedures for livestock mortalities? Here is a reminder of provincially authorized options.

Jean-Sébastien Laflamme, agronome
Research and Development
FPBQ

The disposal of dead farm animals falls under provincial jurisdiction, regulated in Quebec by the *Règlement sur les aliments*, which outlines all authorized procedures for deadstock rendering or disposal. The regulations ensure that producers process or dispose of carcasses in an effective and environmentally safe manner. Regulations for the disposal of dead cattle allow salvage, burial and incineration.

Salvage

Salvagers collect mortalities from farms as requested. Salvagers must possess rendering plant operation or carcass-grade cleanup permits issued by the *Ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec* (MAPAQ).

Salvaged cattle carcasses are transported to the Sanimax rendering plant in Charny, where fats, protein and skin is reclaimed and sold to various markets (for instance, fats are used in cosmetics and biodiesel, protein is used in animal feed, and skin is used to make leather). Salvage prices are set based on these markets and on transportation and rendering costs.

In the past few years, salvage costs have significantly increased, due to the collapse of the rendering by-product market linked to the 2003 BSE case. As well, since the 2007 ban on the use of animal flour containing SRM in all livestock feed in Canada, bovine animal protein is disposed of in burial sites rather than sold on the feed market, which reduces the value of carcasses and therefore increases rendering costs.

Burial

Burial does not require MAPAQ authorization. The regulations' minimum standards must nonetheless be met, in compliance with the following distances:

- outside of any 20 year-recurrence floodway
- at least 75 metres from any body of water or water table
- at least 150 metres from any surface or underground potable water source

The burial pit must be entirely above the water table, and completely covered by quicklime (or equivalent) and by at least 60 centimetres (24 inches) of soil. Carcasses must not stick out beyond the surface of the soil.

Burial is recommended in cases of disposal of only a few carcasses. Producers must keep detailed records indicating the location and number of carcasses buried.

Incineration

Although authorized in Quebec, incineration is costly and is seldom used.

Producers wanting to install an incinerator must do so in compliance with environmental and municipal regulations. Carcasses must be destroyed in a structure that meets the requirements of the Environmental Quality Act, the Regulation respecting the quality of the atmosphere and the Regulation respecting the landfilling and incineration of residual materials. Incinerators with capacity equal to or less than one tonne per hour are exempt from *Ministère du Développement durable, de l'Environnement et des Parcs* (MDDEP) regulations.

Regardless of capacity, operators must notify the MDDEP at least 30 days prior to the incinerator's installation, detailing the structure's location, technical specifications and mechanism, and provide an engineer's affirmation as to the project's compliance with environmental standards. Incinerators may only burn inedible meats and may not be used to burn other residues. Operators must also specify the method of ash disposal.

Forbidden practices

On-farm composting of cattle carcasses is forbidden. A cattle carcass composting pilot project conducted in the early 2000s showed that composting would be possible in Quebec weather winter conditions. However, the prion causing BSE is not destroyed by composting, and the practice remains prohibited in Quebec.

Natural disposal, that is, leaving carcasses in an open-air isolated area to be eaten or to decompose, is also prohibited. Although this disposal method is the cheapest, it exacerbates biosecurity and predation concerns, not to mention negative public perception.

Cattle Carcass Transportation

<p>The transportation of deadstock is regulated by the provincial <i>Règlement sur les aliments</i> and the federal Health of Animals Act. Since 2007, federal regulations have stipulated that a Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) permit is necessary to transport cattle carcasses off farms. Operators are also required to keep complete records on cattle carcass transportation (transporter, date, destination, ATQ number, carcass weight, number of carcasses).</p>
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This article was based on information from the Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean UPA federation document on animal disposal, with financial support from the CDAQ.

Replacement animals

How do we evaluate our rearing practices?

A diagnostic tool adapted to the needs of dairy producers and industry specialists for assessing calf- and heifer-rearing practices.

Véronique Bouffard

Agronomy student

Université Laval

and

Jean Durocher, DVM

Dairy Herd Health Coordinator

Research & Development

Valacta

The rearing period for replacement calves and heifers extends from birth to first calving. This stage is crucial to the maintenance of herd size and the evolution of its production level. The physiological development of the future cow will have a significant impact on the technical and economic performance of a dairy operation. All of the animals on a dairy farm (both male and female) require particular consideration since each of them affects the growth and health of the group as a whole.

Three years of development and validation (see box) have given producers a tool for assessing dairy calf- and heifers-rearing practices that provides them with an objective evaluation of how they manage their replacement animals.

A comprehensive analysis covering 10 aspects of management

The assessment tool consists of three documents:

- 1) *Management System Questionnaire*
- 2) *In-Barn Measurements Questionnaire*
- 3) *Evaluation Worksheet*

During an interview with the producer, the *Management Practices Questionnaire* is used to collect information on calf- and heifer-rearing practices. Technical data, such as space allowance, cleanliness and animal comfort, is compiled on the *In-Barn Measurements Questionnaire* during a visit of the livestock facilities. Based on the scores obtained on these two questionnaires, an Evaluation Report is written up and given to the dairy producer. The producer is then able to see the operation's strong points as well as the areas in need of improvement and discuss these with his or her advisors.

The tool examines ten key components that are the critical elements of rearing practices.

1. Peri-calving

Is the calving area managed in such way as to increase the chance of obtaining a calf born alive and healthy?

2. Newborn calf care

Certain management practices increase a calf's chances of survival. Good management of painful procedures reduces stress and contributes to optimal growth.

3. Colostrum management

Colostrum management affects the health and welfare of the calves during the first months of life. Do present practices contribute to the effective transfer of passive immunity?

4. Separating the calf from its dam

This component provides additional information about the practices in use.

5. Milk feeding (preweaning phase)

Good feeding management is essential for optimal growth. Are the calves receiving enough milk? Is the distribution method adequate? What about hygiene and accessibility?

6. Weaning

Weaning is a stressful experience for an animal. Does the current strategy contribute to the animals' health and well-being?

7. Preweaning housing

Do housing conditions contribute to the comfort, optimal growth and health of the calves and heifers?

8. Post-weaning feeding

Do management practices contribute to the development of a future dairy cow? It's important to check the accessibility of water and feed mangers.

9. Post-weaning housing

Do replacement animals have access to housing that adequately meets their needs?

10. General monitoring of the animals

Are health and growth parameters monitored on a regular basis?

A tool for specialists and producers

The dairy producer may call upon a specialist to do the assessment. Getting an objective opinion from someone outside the operation or being able to invest one's time elsewhere are two good

reasons for a producer to choose that option. A dairy production technician has all the skills needed to complete the assessment tool, which should help keep the cost of the service at a reasonable level. Once informed of the results of the evaluation, the producer can consult the service providers of his or her choosing to move ahead in making improvements.

The assessment tool will be available free of charge (in both French and English) on the CRAAQ's Agri-Réseau website in the section: *Bovins laitiers* (www.agrireseau.qc.ca/bovinslaitiers). Hence producers will be able to evaluate their practices themselves.

The tool for assessing calf- and heifer-rearing practices is derived from current scientific knowledge. It is not intended as “the one-and-only” approach to raising heifers. Because the tool is flexible, it can be adapted to a variety of situations. It is meant to be a reflection of the consensus among the researchers behind the project and the dairy professionals and producers who took part in the consultation.

Finally, it's important to mention that the scoring system used to evaluate rearing practices is not intended to rank producers in relation to one another. The purpose of the tool is to increase awareness of the importance of heifer management, to evaluate high-risk practices, and to stimulate dialogue between producers and their service providers.

Today's heifers are tomorrow's cows. So get your pencils ready!

Defining the areas in need of improvement

“There are few tools available that provide an overall view of calf- and heifer-rearing practices. As a professional, it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint our clients' difficulties. Thanks to this new approach, specialists will be better able to identify the areas in need of improvement and help dairy producers establish better heifer-rearing practices. In my opinion, over the next few years, this method could make a difference in the evolution of rearing management in Quebec.”

*François Poulin, T.P.
Valacta Advisor*

“This assessment tool can only improve the management of replacement animals. Thanks to the questionnaire and the on-farm evaluation, the breeder will be made aware of the different aspects of calf management, such as the importance of the calving area, colostrum, housing, etc. Specialists will use this tool as a guide to better identify inadequate management practices and

take necessary and specific measures to correct the problems in each herd to ensure the welfare of the replacement animals.”

*Dr. Nicole Ruest, DVM
Clinique vétérinaire Centre-du-Québec*

“Rearing replacement animals is a key element in improving herd production. The assessment tool will enable producers to review their management practices and identify areas that need to be improved in order to reach their goals. The production of tomorrow’s cows starts with today’s replacement herd. This tool will help producers further the development of their dairy operations.”

*Élise Gagnon, Agronomist
Regional Consultant
La Coop Fédérée*

Three years in the making

A review of the calf- and heifer-rearing conditions prior to weaning encountered in Quebec was presented at the dairy cattle symposium in 2006.

As a follow-up to that study, a research project was set up to develop a tool to evaluate rearing practices. The aim was to put together a diagnostic grid that would provide an objective evaluation of management practices for replacement animals.

The tool was tested on 28 Quebec dairy farms during the summer of 2008. Producers who took part said the tool was easy to use and was likely to help them improve their practices.

The final stage of the project took place during the summer of 2009. An extensive consultation was undertaken with a variety of industry professionals to hear their suggestions. It was important to ensure that the product could be adapted to the different situations encountered on dairy farms.

Researchers met with a total of 26 specialists:

- dairy production technicians
- dairy production and nutrition advisors
- veterinarians
- organic milk production advisors

- genetics advisors

One of the remarkable aspects of these meetings was the participants' willingness to work together within the context of their professional activities. Dairy specialists recognize that a multidisciplinary approach with regard to advisory services will be required to optimize calf- and heifer-rearing practices. The development of a diagnostic tool is seen as a valuable means of promoting discussion between producers and their service providers, pinpointing areas that need improvement, and exchanging information.

La Financière on the right track

Christian Lacasse
UPA President

For the *Financière agricole*, 2009 was a year of unity and solidarity. In 2010, these priorities remain, particularly given the upcoming income security-related changes that will pose a significant challenge, both individually and collectively. We must not spread ourselves too thin, and rather concentrate our efforts more efficiently and on the right issues.

The UPA fought tooth and nail to ensure that the *La Financière's* funding envelope take the real needs of producers into account. Various amounts were bandied about—\$350 million after the Pronovost report, \$450 million after the Saint-Pierre report... Our advocacy to the bilateral committee eventually led to their acknowledgment that \$650 million was necessary; the government finally agreed to \$600 million.

We do still have some wiggle room, however, which shapes our first objective. As you recall, at the UPA's general congress, Minister Béchard all but confirmed that the effectiveness calculations would not be applied as before, but would take into account the actual situations producers face.

A *La Financière* committee was convened to assess the impact of the proposed measures and consider the effectiveness criteria. The UPA will chair the committee, and do its best to ensure that the measures implemented do not undermine production costs, placing producers in untenable financial situations. Otherwise, we will have reached a breaking point—the point at which the programs are no longer effective, falling short of the very goals they were designed to reach.

Our second objective will concern the implementation of a support cap in all production sectors, as initiated by the government, despite the UPA's opposition to this proposed component. Our goal in regards to the support cap is to avoid unfair distribution, and to maintain the support necessary for agricultural business growth in every sector.

Sector development plans are a key aspect of *Feeding Ourselves / Le pouvoir de se nourrir*, our agricultural policy proposal, and constitute another objective that requires us to pool our

resources. From now on, it is the responsibility of each federation and organization to initiate projects that will mobilize and be structuring for the industry.

Our goal is to increase earnings by increasing market revenues and improving productivity—an objective that complements the MAPAQ’s planned adaptation procedures. Let’s get a movement going, urging the state to design future agricultural policy in support of farmers! Let’s even start outlining the next *La Financière* agreement!

Our game plan for the next few months is simple: we will work together in those areas where we have some leeway. We will ensure that government-implemented reforms do not undercut our production sectors, and entail far worse socio-economic losses than any savings that might result. We will take on these challenges with the same approach that has always worked best: we will stand together.

LTCN 2009-01-21

UPA improving communications to increase mobilization

Since traditional pressure tactics have produced “modest results,” producers are rethinking the methods they use in order to be heard. Consequently, they have asked the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (UPA) for support in “implementing pressure tactics that will have an economic impact,” in order to advance issues they consider important.

However, during workshop discussions held at the 2009 annual congress of the UPA, this notion of “having an economic impact” raised several questions.

“If we wish to rally the community to our side, blocking the trails could work against us,” worried Outaouais agricultural producer Stéphane Bock. “It goes against what we are proposing in our project *UPA of the future*.”

Nonetheless, delegates agreed to identify new tactics that are “more strategic and adapted to today’s realities,” in order to obtain the desired results. “In the case of snowmobiles, these tactics served us well,” declared Sylvain Joyal, president of the *Syndicat des cultures commerciales du Centre-du-Québec*. “Snowmobilers now understand that the trails are located on land that we own.”

Young farmers

Delegates criticized the “lack of legitimacy” of MAPAQ’s Youth Policy. Believing that too few resources have been allocated to its implementation, they want to see it changed into a “genuine Farm Establishment and Retirement Policy.” Consequently, they are calling for the policy to become “one of the main pillars of Quebec’s future agriculture policy.”

Initiatives such as those adopted by the *Fédération des producteurs de lait*, as well as table-egg and hatching-egg producers, which facilitate the establishment of young farmers, should serve as

examples to inspire other groups, according to Jacynthe Gagnon, president of the *Fédération de la Rive-Nord*.

“We should develop new, innovative ways to encourage farm establishment,” Gagnon declared. As a result, delegates have called upon the UPA to put their collective tools to use, in order to help young farmers establish themselves on self-supporting farms.

Farm labour

Delegates argued that since young graduates who are starting up their own businesses are creating jobs for young self-employed workers (i.e. themselves), they should be eligible for financial support equivalent to that offered as tax credits for young workers living in the resource regions and working for a company.

“Why shouldn’t a young farmer starting up in agriculture be eligible for this?” asked apple producer Stéphanie Levasseur. Consequently, delegates called on the Quebec government to widen the eligibility criteria for this program, to include young candidates starting up an agricultural or forestry enterprise.

Delegates also voted for a prolongation of UPA’s financing plan, which includes a fee increase of \$12 on January 1, 2011 and also contribution increases of 3.25 per cent on August 1, 2010 and 2011. However, they asked that a revised financing plan be presented at the next annual congress, which will take into consideration the new orientations of the “*UPA of the future*” project.

Isabelle Bérubé
LTCN 2009-12-10

UPA adopts its own agriculture policy

Using the Quebec government’s work on its future Agriculture and Agri-food Policy as a springboard, the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (UPA) took a head start by presenting its own policy to the some 400 delegates attending its annual congress in Quebec City last December.

The policy, entitled “*Le pouvoir de se nourrir*” [The ability to feed ourselves], is based on four underlying principles: autonomy, health, sustainable development and fairness. It proposes 17 actions, including the creation of a federal bureau to deal with reciprocity of import regulations; a Quebec policy regarding the purchase of local food products; clear country-of-origin labelling; a “patient capital” fund for young farmers; a savings account regime to facilitate farm transfer; as well as marketing agreements, covering production to distribution, which would specifically provide an equitable distribution of the added value among stakeholders.

As summarized by the UPA, the policy “is based on an agricultural model involving a multitude of farms located across all regions, supplying the population with healthy food produced within a context of sustainable development and fairness.”

For the UPA, its policy is also based on the recognition of the economic importance of agriculture and food processing, which generates 174,000 jobs, \$13 billion in added value and \$3 billion in tax revenues, according to a study by *EcoRessources Consultants*.

Action vs. reaction

Following the presentation of this ambitious policy, many delegates congratulated the union on its work and emphasized the importance of disseminating it to all producers, so they may take individual ownership.

“I am very pleased that the UPA is in an action rather than a reaction mode,” stated Réjean Gagnon, a delegate from Bas-Saint-Laurent. Others spoke of the urgency of the situation. “It is important to take concrete actions, otherwise there will be nobody left to defend,” declared beef producer Yvon Boucher. “When the only way to make money in agriculture is to get out of it, there is a major problem,” he concluded.

Some delegates suggested other improvements. According to UPA President Christian Lacasse the policy will continue to evolve and new elements can be added. “Today, this is a first step. We now want to get a maximum number of farmers on board,” he explained. “Our immediate objective is to influence the government’s future agriculture policy, which is presently being drawn up by MAPAQ.

Claude Béchar

Visiting the annual congress, Quebec’s Minister of Agriculture Claude Béchar, spoke about the state of advancement of his government’s future policy, designed to help shape the agriculture of tomorrow.

“We have been at the drawing board for six months now and have drawn you a very nice picture,” interjected the UPA President. “Seriously though, we have worked hard to develop our vision of the future,” he added, handing him a copy of the UPA’s policy, which was adopted the night before by the 400 participating delegates.

“Usually, I leave here with a basket of food. This time, I am leaving with a grocery list that will cost I don’t know how many millions,” joked Béchar. The parent legislation for the future agricultural policy is scheduled to be adopted before the end of the present parliamentary session.

Julie Mercier
LTCN 2009-12-10

No additional powers to municipalities on land-use

Farmers do not want to yield any more power to municipalities regarding land-use planning, particularly when it comes to dealing with the agricultural zone. The message was clearly sent to the Quebec government by delegates attending the 85th annual congress of the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (UPA), held in early December in Quebec City.

Delegates attending the annual meeting mandated their organization to oppose any changes to the *Act respecting land-use planning and development*, currently under revision, that would give more power to the municipal sector regarding land-use within their territories. They accused the MRCs of having poorly managed the task and of having shown opportunism regarding residential, commercial and industrial development—to the detriment of agricultural land—in order to generate more tax dollars.

Delegates also voted that the revision of the *Act respecting the use of agricultural land* must not weaken the protection of the agricultural zone, nor give more latitude to municipalities for permitting non-agricultural uses within the green zone. They maintained that the fundamental mandate of the *Commission de protection du territoire agricole de Québec* (CPTAQ) must be preserved. Producers and representatives called upon the UPA to give priority to a collective approach for the management of residential applications and that it become involved in maximizing the agricultural and forestry potential in the development plans affecting the agricultural zone.

Tillable and abandoned lands

Farmland held by speculators is being left abandoned, while farm expansion is limited because of a lack of tillable land, as a result of the *Règlement sur les exploitations agricoles* (REA). Delegates therefore demanded that the Quebec government introduce incentives to bring abandoned lands back into cultivation and to impose penalties on landowners who do not put their good potential farmland to an agricultural use. In the workshop, the 2nd vice-president of the *Fédération des producteurs de bois*, André Roy, reminded delegates that “agricultural use” also includes silviculture (forest cultivation).

The participants called on the Ministry of the Environment to find ways to preserve areas under cultivation at the watershed level, since they are continually being amputated by uses other than agricultural. Delegates believe that the ban imposed by the ministry, which prevents increasing the cultivated land in so-called “degraded” watersheds, should only apply to that portion of a municipality located within the given watershed and should not affect its whole territory. Also, villages where water quality has improved should be removed from the degraded watershed list.

Other resolutions

Delegates called upon MAPAQ to create a multi-party workgroup with a mandate to find ways to ensure that the exercise yards often used in beef production continue to be an economic solution for farmers, while also being considered environmentally sound. In the meantime, beef producers who use these exercise yards and wintering pens in compliance with the Best Practices

Guide should continue to be authorized. In addition, work to stabilize streambanks, in order to reduce non-point source pollution, should not be limited to the \$10,000 in the *Prime-Vert* program.

Finally, the future *Stratégie phytosanitaire québécoise* [Quebec Plant Health Strategy] should include representatives from the horticultural, vegetable and bee-keeping sectors, and be provided with an adequate budget. Delegates also chose to re-align the program's objectives based on integrated pest management principles, not on reduction targets.

Jean-Charles Gagné
LTCN 2009-12-10

Looking for more efficient programs

On several occasions, delegates at the annual congress of the *Union des producteurs agricoles* (UPA)—held in Quebec City in early December—called for programs and agricultural policies that are more efficient and tailored to their needs.

To facilitate tax rebates, delegates asked that a communication process between the *Ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec* (MAPAQ) and municipal governments be put in place so that “any new information resulting from changes or additions to lot numbers be recorded in the producer's registration file and that he or she be informed of this.”

In an attempt to block the possibility of shifting the municipal tax load onto agricultural, the annual congress also called upon Quebec to make it compulsory for municipalities to apply a separate taxation rate for farms and to revise the tax evaluation methods for farms, as soon as possible. During a workshop, delegates decided not to withhold privileges given to off-road vehicles using trails over farm and forestry land as a pressure tactic.

Levinoff-Colbex

The some 400 delegates at the UPA congress unanimously supported a motion to improve the profitability of the Levinoff-Colbex slaughterhouse. The slaughterhouse's board of directors was mandated to take the necessary steps to ensure that all cull cattle are sent to the slaughterhouse through a single channel marketing process.

Delegates also called on the provincial and federal governments to adequately support both an integrated packing plant and the enterprise's recapitalization project. Along the same lines, they called on the federal government for a financial support program to compensate for the additional costs of removing specified risk materials (SRM). Finally, the delegates backed a motion to develop a UPA action plan to create a real sense of ownership by farmers regarding Levinoff-Colbex and to strengthen the single channel marketing system.

Modifications

Facing a scarcity of veterinarians, delegates proposed that the *Université de Montréal's* Faculty of Veterinary Medicine increase the number of students admitted and modify the selection process in order to give greater weight to candidates showing an interest in treating farm animals and to those wishing to practice in rural regions. They also suggested that veterinarians from other provinces, as well as those from overseas, be given easier access to practice, that technicians be allowed to perform certain veterinary acts and that incentives be increased to practice in rural regions.

The general congress unanimously adopted a broad resolution calling on the Canadian Wildlife Service, MAPAQ and the Ministry of Natural Resources to introduce the necessary measures to reduce the populations of wildlife species causing damage to crops, livestock and woodlands, as well as for a preventative program for *chronic wasting disease of cervids* (CWD). They also demanded that compensation be proportionate to the damage incurred. With regard to highway safety, delegates solicited a revision of the safety regulations and a more uniform application of the rules.

Julie Mercier
LTCN 2009-12-10

Wood producers ask to delay payments

The economic crisis has hit hard in the forestry sector. Private forest wood producers have experienced serious losses, unable to find buyers at wood plants, since many have been shut down. They are therefore calling on the Quebec government to apply the “residuality principle,” which gives them priority over the public forest in the marketing of wood. Producers are also asking the special Canada-Quebec workgroup to devise programs that would postpone their payments of capital and cover their interest payments.

This resolution was resoundingly adopted by delegates participating in workshop #4 at the UPA general congress, dealing with marketing and trade. Participants also quickly passed a resolution regarding the new Forestry Regime, calling on Quebec to maintain the integrity of the joint plans. Thus, wood producers hope to eliminate from Bill 57 the requirement that a portion of the wood from private forests must be sold through the future marketing bureau.

The majority of this workshop's resolutions were quickly and unanimously adopted. However, one exception was the first resolution, where delegates argued long and hard regarding the promotion of Quebec's agri-food products and the marketing practices of distributors. During the plenary session, the 2nd vice-president, Denis Bilodeau, referred to “a long grocery list.” Indeed, delegates are pressuring Quebec for adequate funding for the *Aliments du Québec* marketing project so that it can properly fulfill its mandate, similar to Ontario's program, “Foodland Ontario.”

Delegates also asked the government to introduce a method to ensure that distributors buy a minimum of Quebec products, by category. Many preferred a voluntary rather than a coercive approach towards retailers and distributors. Thus, they called on the UPA to implement an action plan regarding distribution, which would favour a system of rewards for retailers' efforts and whereby actions with the most merit could be publicly recognized through various methods, such as an Award of Merit event, for example.

Along the same lines, delegates voted to call on the Quebec government to make public institutions give priority to Quebec products in their purchases, following Italy's example. This requirement should be included in the future Agriculture Policy and in government policy. With regard to "Product of Canada" labelling, delegates again called on Ottawa to revise the maximum level of foreign ingredients. This maximum should be increased to 15 per cent, as long as all of the principal ingredients originate in Canada.

The Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT), signed in Quebec City on October 15, 2009, remains hard to swallow for farmers. Therefore, delegates voted to ensure that Quebec respects its commitments. They called on the government to be consistent in guaranteeing that the AIT clearly protects its rights with regard to consumer protection, agricultural producers' collective organizations and supply management. They also called on Quebec to suspend the implementation of any unfavourable decisions by the panel regarding supply management, collective marketing, labelling and the regulations governing the composition of food.

With regard to dispute resolution, producers were firmly opposed to the introduction of a settlement process between individuals and the government. Last summer, the provincial premiers agreed to open a new round of negotiations that could result in this type of mechanism. Producers emphasized that, at the beginning of the year, mechanisms that presently apply only to government-to-government disputes were strengthened.

Traceability was also discussed by the delegates. It appears that ear tags have displayed problems of durability. Producers therefore called on *Agri-traçabilité Québec* to work on improving the quality of the tags, as well as on a revision of the regulations. Also, they would like to be rapidly notified, by way of a paper copy, of any changes to their inventory, in order to be able to make any necessary corrections.

Pierre-Yvon Bégin
LTCN 2009-12-10