



SPIRITED VIEW

Counting on accountability

When it comes to CFIA the question seems to be “who is in charge here?”



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Counting on accountability would seem pretty self-explanatory. Break down the word “accountability” and it is two basic words that most first graders can understand — account on ability. In Wikipedia, accountability is defined as: “A is accountable to B when A is obliged to inform B about A’s (past or future) actions and decisions, to justify them, and to suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct.”

In leadership roles, accountability is “the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for actions, products, decisions, and policies including the administration, governance, and implementation within the scope of the role or employment position and encompassing the obligation to report, explain and be answerable for resulting consequences.” That’s a mouthful, but boil it down and it is all about doing one’s job. It seems pretty straight-forward, but being in the beef business when we rely on people with influence beyond our control, this definition seems to have been missed.

Over the past 10 years my journey has been amazing. From beef specialist within the Alberta government, to rancher, to branded beef marketer, to international beef exporter and to becoming a member of Canadian Beef Export Federation (CBEF). Along the way I’ve been told stories about bureaucracy that seem too farfetched to be true, and as such, I am always a bit skeptical. Case in point the Canadian Food Inspection Agency — better known as the CFIA.

I have never had much involvement with this organization, other than dealing with the regulatory side as it pertains to slaughtering cattle and the rules between federal and provincial inspected plants. However, when it comes to exports it’s a brand-new story and now looking back, everything I have heard seems more like an underestimate of how poorly this organization functions.

As cattle producers, hearing about the saga of recovering lost beef markets from 2003 is getting old and would make you wonder whether our leaders within the beef industry are doing their job. As you may remember, I too was skeptical, yet time has proven me wrong and all I can say is the CFIA has no accountability, at least from my perspective, when it comes to trade and opening international export markets.

In the past I was not privy nor did I really care much about the backroom politics of international beef marketing. I felt that our brand could make enough penetration in the domestic beef market and we would not need to bother to ship abroad. However, just as the commodity-beef industry exports 70 per cent-plus of production, so too must our company. By entering this world we now hand over accountability,

that was for the most part in our hands, into the hands of CFIA that is accountable to I don’t know who or what, yet.

Its interesting when the “F” is removed from CFIA you end up with CIA. But, the difference here being that at least within CIA there is a supposed chain of command with the authority to get something done.

Is this sounding like another Weder rant? I wish it was, but there are many, many examples of where CFIA blundering and lack of accountability has resulted in Canadian beef sitting on the sideline waiting for market access. Case in point — Canada’s access to 20,000 tonnes of zero-tariff beef into the European Union, which was granted to the Americans this past August, for high-quality, AA and better UTM beef. Even though

Canadian beef complies with the definition of high quality beef, we do not have access because our graders are not federal employees. Our grading was privatized to the Canada Beef Grading Agency and, until we find a solution, Canada must continue to pay 20 per cent duty to access this market.

What does this mean? Canadian exporters receive 20 per cent less for their beef than U.S. packer’s who already have a fabrication cost advantage as compared to Canadian EU-approved plants. We are dead in the water in a market that has huge potential before we can even start to build a customer base for Canadian beef. In fact, in two years the allocation of high quality Beef into the EU market will be well over 40,000 tonnes.

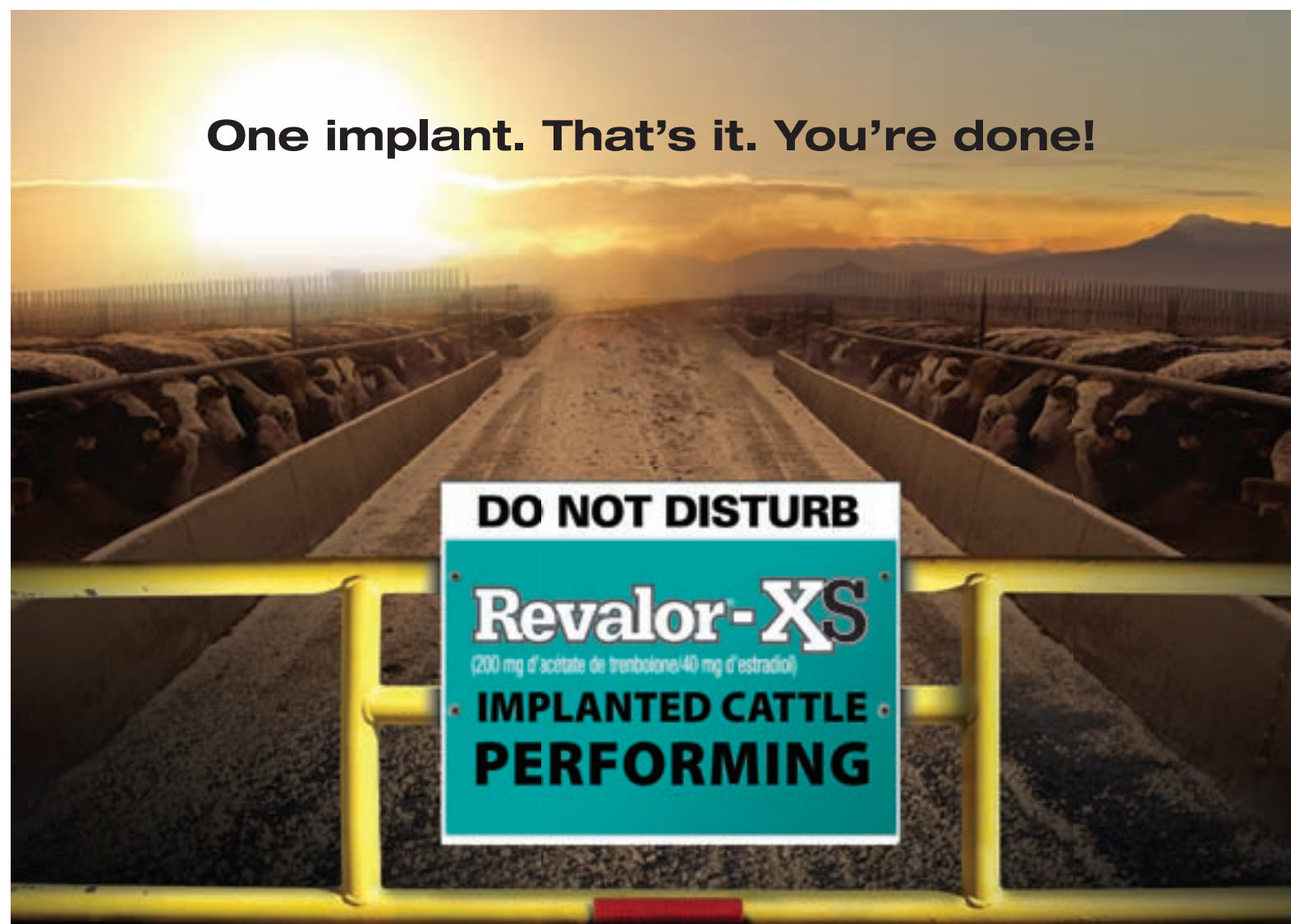
But all is not lost and there is a

simple solution. We need to have the graders in the EU plants in Canada federally employed and we would be off to the races. In fact, this has been suggested by the Canadian Cattlemen’s Association, the Canadian Beef Grading Agency and by CBEP and carried forward to the CFIA to take up the chain of command and presented to the EU as Canada’s compliance to the definition of the rule. Trouble is, no one seems to know who is accountable to move this through the channels, and worse yet when you want an answer no one knows who is in charge and no one answers your questions. Worse though, it makes for a pretty poor story when you meet with potential customers for Canadian beef from all over Europe, as I have for the past two weeks.

Now if we all ran our business with this level of accountability we would all have been done a long time ago, however when you are in government it seems measurables are irrelevant. Being a member of CBEP now, I can see the challenges that have held up our return to marketing normalcy. A solution to trade improvement is beyond the control of many of our cattle organizations and we really must address our regulatory organizations such as CFIA. Perhaps tying their pension plan to the success or failure of the industries they represent may help them discover the ability to understand accountability that is pro business and not pro bureaucracy. ✍

Dr. Christoph E. Weder is a purebred Angus breeder in the Peace region of Alberta and also runs SVR Ranch Consulting. For additional info check out www.spiritviewranch.com

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