

Livestock Notes

Despite Obstacles, Cattle Industry Thrives

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — "The cattle industry has survived, despite the efforts of man," said Dr. Harlan Ritchie of Michigan State University.

His tongue-in-cheek observation captured the attention of about 400 Limousin breeders, university people, and beef industry leaders gathered November 30 to December 2 at Kansas State University for the Leader's Edge Limousin Directions Breeder Symposium.

Ritchie offered a historical perspective of beef cattle type to Limousin breeders who had gathered to discuss specific trait and type recommendations for their breed — traits which were considered for fine-tuning in an effort to better serve the commercial industry. Although the Limousin breed has posted four

consecutive years of record growth, its breeders are looking for ways to open up expansion even more.

As breeders prepared to consider various recommendations, Ritchie urged them to consider what man has done to cattle throughout history in terms of type — often type is defined to a great extent by frame size.

Ritchie showed slides from cattle in the 1800s, when frame size was relatively moderate. From there, cattlemen chased early maturity so far past equilibrium that history saw the "stocking stuffer" models of the 1940s and 1950s. The penchant for small frame size spawned the advent of dwarfism, a genetic defect Ritchie termed the holocaust of the purebred beef industry.

Reluctant to learn the lessons of

history, cattlemen swung the pendulum of frame/type back the other way, again past the point of moderation in the 1970s to the giants of the 1980s, many which possessed more leg than meat.

Today, an air of moderation seems to be wafting across the industry once again. Recognized as a moderate framed Continental breed, Limousin producers at the conference endorsed the idea that current frame size in Limousin cattle should be maintained — neither increased nor decreased — as fine-tuning takes place in other trait areas.

Perhaps Gene Raymond, past president of the North American Limousin Foundation (NALF) and Limousin breeder in Garnett, Kansas best summed up the mission of the Limousin breeders at the symposium and the mission of the symposium itself, as far as the breed is concerned: "The breeder that culls the hardest, selects the hardest, and tries the hardest will be the most successful, the same with breeds."

"In order to make progress, we must be critical of our product. We need to seriously accept criticism," he said.

Beginning with a type task force meeting last summer which established trait recommenda-

tions, and culminating in the three-day symposium, that's exactly what the Limousin breed has done: invite critique from outside their fraternity as well as from within it in the name of improvement.

Such an invitation makes the symposium unique in modern-day purebred history. The record shows individual breeds are predisposed to guarding against anyone who would proclaim that breed less than perfect. The breed way has been to steamroll criticism with promotion, rather than open the gates to it.

"We must excel in our virtues and be adequate in all other traits," said Raymond, explaining no single breed can be all things to all people.

"Limousin is known as the carcass breed," said Raymond. "It's important we don't lose sight of that."

Commercial cattleman Jim Theeck of Brenham, Texas, underscored the need for breeds to understand their use within the industry. He offered a theory which doesn't allow for second chances: "We're (the commercial industry) not going to continue dealing with 60-80 breeds of

cattle. We're going to get down to 8-10 breeds, which will be either maternal or carcass."

What's more, Theeck speculated his predicted handful of breeds would not include one which attempted to excel in both areas. He doesn't think it's possible for a single breed to excel in both, given the inherent antagonistic relationship that exists between the two types.

Presentations by many of the speakers at the symposium illustrated the harsh realities of the beef industry. That is what Limousin breeders wanted as they are developing their trait recommendations with an eye as much on the total industry as on their own breed.

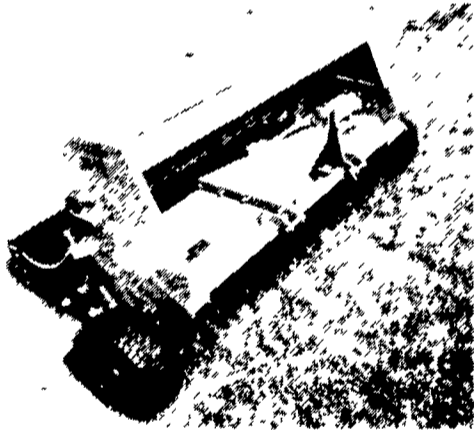
Dr. John Edwards of Texas A&M University emphasized beef consumption is on the increase again, thanks to retail response to consumer concern over fat. While retailers have been trimming away the fat, cattlemen have been laying it on because the marketing system still rewards them for it. Limousin's genetic leanness and high cutability has helped spur its rapid growth.

And too, Dr. Bill Mies of Texas A&M said the current marketing system is the reason cattle feeders are more likely to look for good weigh-ups and poor management in feeder prospects than they are to pay a premium for heavy muscled, lean cattle.

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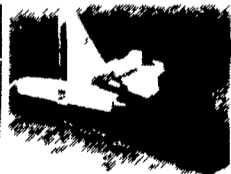
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