

Moving pens protects water and herd – saves time, too

Real estate people tell us it's all about location, location, location. Garth Livingston will tell you the same is true with cattle barns.

When the Roblin area farmer inherited a quarter section of land with an old barn site, he knew there was a lot of work to be done to bring the facilities up to modern environmental and health standards. The first thing he had to do was move them to a better place.

The barns were built in the 1950s "and, back then, you built where it was convenient," Garth explained. "So (the previous owner) built where it was convenient for him. The well was right there close to an area that held a lot of water so he used it to water his cattle."

The proximity of the barn to the well made watering the cattle easy, but it presented a potential risk of groundwater contamination. Garth knew that if he wanted to continue raising cattle on the property, he would need to move the pens away from that well for the sake of his family and the cattle.

After completing an Environmental Farm Plan, Garth was able to access funding from the Environmental Farm Action Program. With help from *Growing Forward*, Garth redesigned his yard so that he could move the cattle to a better location far away from the well or any surface water courses. He dismantled his old pens and the depression where they once stood was brought back up to ground level. This prevents surface water from pooling around the well and potentially spilling down into it.

The new location and design of the pens have produced benefits beyond water quality improvements. The new facility is better designed to house, bed and sort the hundred head of Angus cattle that make up the herd.

Designed to keep the herd on the move

The key to the success of the new facility is that the cattle are able to move around a lot more.



Garth Livingston's new system is healthier for the cattle and allows him to sort the herd in one-third the time.

With the old system the cattle were kept in one place and the feed was brought to them. Manure stayed there until it was removed and spread, a job Garth contracted to someone else.

Spreading manure is a time-sensitive task that should be done frequently to reduce the risk of nutrient overload and runoff. Garth was looking for a way to distribute it more often and over as many fields as possible without driving costs too high.

The most cost-effective answer was to give the job to the cows. Instead of taking the feed to them, they were moved to the feed.

Mobile manure spreaders

"We do what's called round bale silaging, where you feed them out in a 40 to 50 acre field and you rotate that all winter long," Garth said. "They're fed on a separate spot every day so there's never any one area that gets too much manure."

During the summer he'll also grow feed corn on select sections and then come winter, he'll let the cattle graze it where it stands. What comes off the field as corn goes back on the field as fertilizer. The cattle have freedom to move, and Garth saves fuel and reduces wear and tear on his machinery.

When the cattle get thirsty they have to walk a half mile back to the pens to drink. Garth says this is good for the overall health of the herd. They're in better physical shape, they're more supple and they calve better, meaning there are fewer vet calls.

A more efficient way to work

Besides those advantages, the cattle become accustomed to moving about the property. That helps Garth save time when he sorts the herd.

"We built these pens so we have a sorting facility and a calving barn in one place, but in order to get to the water the cows have to walk past the feeding and bedding areas," Garth said.

"If we need to put an animal into the barn or into a chute they think they're walking to get water. Then you just close



the gate, send them in another direction. One person can go out there and sort them without them realizing that they're being sorted."

Garth recounted the time he and his wife sorted their entire herd, processed all the cows and vaccinated the calves. They started at 8:30 in the morning and were finished by noon, just in time to head to Brandon for a fundraising party for their daughter's university graduation. With the old pens, sorting that many cows would have been a 12 hour day. The design efficiency allows fewer people to handle the cattle safely in one-third the time. This is especially valuable since their children aren't living at home anymore.

"The kids are good to help when they come home, but you have to work with the cattle at times when the kids aren't here," he said. "With this setup, one or two people and a dog can manage the herd."

Healthier cows and calves

Having most of the cows feeding elsewhere also keeps the calving pens cleaner. When they're born they're segregated as soon as possible. When they're healthy enough Garth moves them onto a small paddock where it's high and dry and free of excess manure.

"In the past you'd have them in the pen all winter long and the manure builds up and that's not good for them," Garth said. "Come spring time you might move them to another area but as it thaws out there's quite a bit of manure. The cows' udders get dirty and the calf sucks away at that. It leads to scours and things that can kill the calf."

Overall it's a safer and smarter system. It keeps the manure from accumulating in the pens and near the well, and puts it out in the field where it adds nutrients and organic matter. The cattle are allowed to move around as they please and, with judicious management, that makes them easier and safer to handle.

Above all, it keeps the cows content because they're allowed to behave like cows. ■

Industry input helps "Growing Forward 2" take shape

With *Growing Forward* slated to end on March 31, 2013, development of the next agricultural policy framework is well underway.

Over the past year and a half, the Canada and Manitoba governments have been seeking input from farm leaders, value chain stakeholders, farmers and the general public. These consultations with industry and the public have helped to focus strategic objectives and policy priorities.

Plans will take on greater clarity in the spring of 2012, as federal/provincial/territorial governments develop program approaches that support the policy priorities identified during the consultations.

The new framework will continue to build on the long-term policy direction laid down by the previous frameworks. The goal is a competitive, sustainable sector, ready to adapt to new market opportunities, demands and expectations.

Visit the www.manitoba.ca/agriculture and click on the *Growing Forward* link to view presentations, discussion papers and summary reports from the consultations. Ongoing updates will be posted as the framework evolves. ■

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