

PRO GRAZER: Trevor Toland kicks his intensive grazing program into gear each spring. Every two to four days, he moves cows through a carefully managed pasture mix of red clover and fescue in the uplands, and reed canary grass and alsike clover in the floodplains.



Making sense of beef

By **HOLLY SPANGLER**

Key Points

- Smallest U.S. herd since 1951 produces same amount of beef.
- State cattle numbers trend to getting bigger or getting out.
- Older cattle producers cutting back with no one to take over.

TREVOR Toland has a reasonably simple question about the food labels on his beloved beef products.

"If it's a product of the U.S. and we want people to know that, then why is it in microscopic print?" queries the Macomb beef producer and new president of the Illinois Beef Association. Toland's observation came as he helped a

grocery shopper check out the source of the beef in the meat counter. "You consider what a big deal COOL [country-of-origin labeling] was, and now it's so small on the labels — and on the back!"

The observation is a commonsense one and representative of some of the issues facing the Illinois beef industry today.

Toland's tenure of leadership begins at a time when groups like the Humane Society of the United States are fighting to end animal agriculture, under

the guise of humane treatment of animals. Yet he observes, "I don't think there's anybody in the world who cares about cattle like cattlemen. It's too much work if you don't care about them."

It's a time when beef producers are losing money left and right due to high feed costs, yet efficiency is at an all-time high. He explains: "Right now, we have the smallest cow herd nationwide since 1951. But we're producing the same amount of beef and feeding fewer animals. Larger carcasses."

And it's also a time when a growing movement of consumers claim grass-fed beef is truly better than corn-fed, an affront to the Illinois beef industry in general. Toland's response? "Cattle are grazers, I won't argue that. But if you want true taste, there's nothing

better than corn-fed beef."

There's a whole lot of logic in Toland's arguments, yet he knows the cattle industry is in a tough spot. In Illinois, the average cow herd numbers just 29. The average cattleman is in his 60s. Anybody with a patch of grass that could be planted to corn has likely planted it. IBA membership is down, fluctuating with the industry.

By the numbers

And though cattle on feed in Illinois make up just 2% of the national total, the state did see more cattle on feed the past couple of years, due to transportation costs and ethanol coproduct availability. IBA's executive vice president Maralee Johnson expects the big feedlots to get bigger and the smaller producers to look for niche markets. And those

producers approaching retirement age? Too many don't have anyone to follow in their footsteps. Johnson sums it up well when she says Illinois cattle producers are "getting bigger, getting specialized or getting out."

Toland is a prime example. After retiring from a teaching career in 2000, he began building his herd and an intensive grazing and pasture management system. But this past winter, he was injured by a first-calf heifer. He and his wife, Jane, realize they need to cut down on chores and cow numbers. By fall, he expects his cow herd to number less than a dozen head, leaving room to expand their heifer development program.

But Toland is optimistic about the industry. Exports are back up, following the bovine spongiform encephalopathy scare in 2003. And he says the future is impossible to predict, in part because beef's future hinges on ethanol.

"If ethanol moves to a cellulosic source and corn needs a place to go, we could see more ground go back to pasture."



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