

We Are Addicted to Oil



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Fifteen years ago, I had the opportunity to take a beef cattle management course at Colorado State University taught by the late Bob Taylor. Many of you might remember Taylor and the message he preached about reducing inputs, moderating cow size, reducing labor requirements and working together as a family.

Taylor was a Hereford breeder and, in my opinion, one of the great beef cattle industry minds of his generation. He was a soft-spoken teacher who studied a lot, wrote a lot and enjoyed getting into philosophical discussions with young students. He was the centerpiece of the century breeders group, a group of Hereford breeders whose mission was to produce low-cost, moderate-frame, efficient cattle for the commercial beef industry.

At the time, Taylor was not taken very seriously within the industry. The average Hereford breeder thought maybe Taylor was “off a half a bubble.” Yet, corporate ranchers such as Matador Cattle Co. and Deseret Ranches paid strong attention to what Taylor had to say about return on land resources, cow carrying cost, percent calf crop weaned per cow exposed and real profit when honestly assessing all of your labor costs and inputs.

Taylor was a teacher of how to best manage what nature tends to give us and to not take away from nature more than what she’s capable of giving back. In short, it was an early lesson on sustainable agriculture. This philosophy to this day has never been an

in vogue concept as the beef industry has, for the most part, continued to make cows bigger and stouter, and we continue to feed yearling and 2-year-old bulls to make them heavier, fatter and prettier. That’s what the commercial industry has wanted. Taylor challenged the status quo, and today an entire industry is beginning to feel the pains he predicted.

Our beef industry and our entire food system have been built on cheap fuel and cheap grain. When feed and fuel resources are plentiful, maximizing production and increasing weights seems to be the best thing to do. It wasn’t until the Hereford breed began getting commercial resistance because of birth weight and calving issues that it began to moderate cow size and pay attention to calving ease. It isn’t until we get serious pressure before we seem to make a correction. We are addicted to corn and fuel, and that addiction has prevented us from listening to Taylor’s message.

The first week in April corn hit \$6 a bushel and could go to \$7, while diesel is approaching \$4 per gallon. My wife still drives one of the largest SUV’s that General Motors produces, and I drive a crew cab F150. I commute 43 miles one way to work every day, and if you know what kind of mileage a four-wheel drive F150 gets, then you pretty much know what I’m spending on gas per month. My wife and I are addicted, and something is going to have to change. Frankly, I feel guilty that I’m consuming

more than what nature has intended. The American farmer cannot bail us out of this predicament, and corn is an ineffective “methadone treatment” for our oil addiction. In fact, the entire bio-fuel policy just creates additional problems for the American consumer. Just look at your monthly grocery bill; it won’t get better.

As an industry and as a nation, we are going to have to change in order to sustain the type of industry that we hope to hand down to the next generation. How big are your cows? What are you going to do to become more efficient? Can we personally sacrifice within our own family networks and adapt to an inevitable energy crisis until we can figure out a real substitute? Yes, there will be a substitute someday for petroleum-based energy, but in the meantime we’re going to need to adjust.

Where there are pressures and challenges, there are opportunities, and I believe that the Hereford breed is in a position to address these challenges. I know that many of you breeders are feeling these pressures, and I want to encourage you to stick with it and be smart. My wife and I are trying to get smarter about this automobile fuel consumption situation. If you haven’t talked to your customer about his needs lately, it might be time. If you and your customer get together, you might both decide that you can cut back your bull development cost next year, and if you study hard enough, you might be surprised where other efficiencies can be found. **HW**