

By Lorne McClinton

TRUST BUT VERIFY

Beef sector works together to develop sustainability protocols

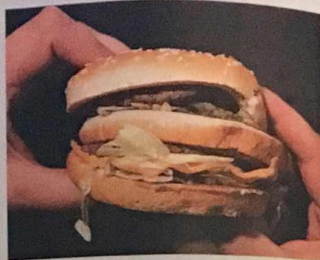
Consumers are suspicious of how their food is produced these days and they want reassurance that it's being done in as sustainable and humane a way as possible. However, they have little faith in the promises they receive from farm groups, food retailers, restaurants and government regulators that say it is.

Current production techniques may meet those demands, but most consumers have lived in cities for generations, and don't have the familiarity to know. They want to hear it from someone they trust...and have it verified by an independent third party

without an economic interest in the system. Without this, they'll base their opinions on what they see or hear on Facebook and other social media.

McDonald's is under pressure from their customers to move to sustainable supply lines but what is sustainable and humane production? Jeffrey Fitzpatrick-Stilwell, with McDonald's Canada, says that since there wasn't a globally accepted definition of what sustainable beef was in 2014, the company decided to take a proactive approach. They launched their verified sustainable beef pilot project the same year to try to find workable solutions.

The restaurant chain developed a series of indicators based on the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef's



►Above: McDonald's has taken a proactive but collaborative approach with the Canadian beef industry to develop sustainable beef protocols.

five founding principles of sustainable beef production (natural resources, people and community, animal health and welfare, food and efficiency and innovation) to see how the sector stacked up. They completed 183 on-farm verifications, including both Cargill's and JBS major processing facilities in Alberta as well as McDonald's Canadian patty plant in Spruce Grove, Alberta for the project.

Measured up. John and Tracy Buckley's ranch near Cochrane, Alberta was one of the first to go through the process. A large team of inspectors showed up with checklists to



►Above: John and Tracy Buckley were among the first Canadian ranchers to sign up for McDonald's verified sustainable beef pilot project.

evaluate how the ranch measured up. "They were interested in the health of our land; whether we recycle and how we treat our animals," Buckley says. "Their questions covered a lot of things that we just take for granted such as how do we care for our animals and do we pay our bills?"

No changes. In the end, the Bucleys didn't have to change a thing in their operation. Going through the process was a positive experience for them. It even provided a few helpful ways to improve. For example, they're now developing a written

set of operating procedures instead of keeping them in their heads.

"Our verified sustainable beef pilot project showed that Canadian beef producers are doing a fantastic job," Fitzpatrick-Stilwell says. But it also showed that consumers won't believe something is true just because McDonald's says it. Independent third party verification is going to be a critical part of convincing consumers that producers are doing a good job.

While McDonald's developed its own indicators and verification framework during the pilot project, they won't be the ones they will use in the future. Fitzpatrick-Stilwell says the chain is fully committed to being a



►Above: Cattle are moved regularly to maintain pasture health ►Below: Buckley says going through the process was a positive experience.

part of Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef and will use the Roundtable's framework going forward.

"It's important for us to proceed in a collaborative fashion," Fitzpatrick-Stilwell says. "We believe it doesn't do anybody in the value chain any good to compete on the sustainability attributes of the food that people are growing and raising for us. There are plenty of ways that we can and do compete. But this is one area where we really need to work together so that Canadians get the same story from everyone about the positive aspects of Canadian beef." ■

