

Thank you Meyers and Listening to Our Customers

The annual meeting in April was a good one despite the weather challenges. The Meyer family did a grand job of organizing and of making everyone feel welcome. This was the third annual conference that they have hosted. To top that off, Jacob Meyer, Theresa and Dan's son agreed to serve as your newest director. The membership elected Jacob by unanimous vote. He is our newest and youngest director. We need young people. We need young farmers and young leaders. Jacob has raised and handled bison all his life.

Thank you Meyers, and welcome to the board, Jacob.

There was a particularly interesting panel discussion during the annual conference. The topic was the future of the bison industry.

Of the five panelists, four are well known bison growers and marketers. Lee Graese, Loren Smeester, Peter Cook and Mike Maass. The fifth panelist, Tim Lundstrom is CFO of the NABC. This panel of five has incredible depth in the bison industry.

The panelists spoke about a number of things but what stuck with me were the comments about customer feedback. They spoke about what our customers want from us and from our bison.

All of the panelists market bison meat through more than one channel.

Four sell directly to consumers, several sell to restaurants, several sell to chain stores.

Initially it was my intention to quote each panelist. As I wrote a draft I realized how likely I was to misquote someone or attribute the wrong comment to a particular panelist. To avoid that error I will generalize only. Therefore, what follows are my recollections with some of my own thoughts mixed in.

The requirements for each customer/distribution channel differ significantly.

Many customers, especially those who buy direct are keenly concerned about what they eat and how it is raised.

Some are asking for meat raised on non-Genetically Modified feeds.

Some want grass fed only.

Some, especially professional chefs want a moderate amount of fat. They need fat for ease of cooking and to satisfy restaurant diners. From my experience that is more fat than can consistently be developed on a grass only diet.

Buyers for food chains want meat that is consistent all year around. That too, is hard to accomplish on a grass only diet.

Buyers for grocery stores need a reliable, uninterrupted supply. Seasonality is a problem for these buyers.

We sell directly to consumers by the quarter, so that is the market segment we know best.

Grass feeding works best for us, on our farm and in our market.

I have not seen a survey but I suspect that when folks order an expensive steak in a fancy restaurant their immediate interests are different from the interests of our direct sale customers.

Our customers want to know what the animals eat, how they live, if they are medicated and even how they die.

It is not surprising that consumers would care about such details of bison life. We bison producers have initiated and encouraged this line of thinking by promoting our animals as hormone free, antibiotic free and natural.

Hormone free and antibiotic free are specific. There are however, unlimited variations of the definition of “natural.” I would not want to even start that conversation.

We prefer grass fed meat but it has its limitations. We have a high reorder rate and we lose few customers. Even so, our biggest challenge is educating customers on how to successfully cook grass fed meat.

I am reluctant to say grass fed meat is hard to cook, but I would say it is easy to overcook.

Occasionally we lose a customer because they simply want more fat in their meat. Either for ease of cooking, taste, or just plain personal preference.

Customers can make choices.

My point in all this is that what customers want from bison providers extends over a broad range.

We as bison producers need to listen to our customers and do the best job we can to satisfy their wants.

Those different wants will require different production methods.

As with so many other things in life, communication is crucial. We need to listen to our customers and communicate clearly and openly with them.

Well that is enough on a serious subject.

I realize you are reading this in summer. At least I hope we are having summer.

Assuming it is summer, maybe you will enjoy the following little story.

Passing a Semi in the Cumberland Mountains

In January, Gail and I drove to south Florida to visit kids and grandkids.

I enjoy driving across the US and Gail is a delightful passenger.

Almost always.

We make the trip each winter. There are limitless routes from here to there.

This year on the way down we drove through the Cumberland Mountains of eastern Kentucky.

It snowed a few inches which is quite unusual in Kentucky.

The drivers, including the semi drivers were not well experienced in snow.

We had several lengthy delays when jack-knifed trucks closed the highway.

As we restarted after the longest delay, it was already dark and we were far from our intended motel.

I was passing a semi on the four-lane.

The speed limit was 70. I was going a bit over that.

The trucker had all his flashers blinking so I passed him cautiously.

As I got past the truck I remarked, "I wonder why he had his emergency flashers on at 72."

It was quiet for a bit and then Gail said, "Well, maybe he is a deaf old farmer and his wife is not along to tell him his blinkers are on."

We had a great trip.

O! One other point regarding the five panelists. Did you notice that all five of these active members of the MnBA live outside of Minnesota? I think that says something nicely positive about our organization.

Best Regards, Tom Barthel

Secretary and Director at Large

"