

Black-Ink Shares Ideas

E-mail links hundreds of producers as members of a virtual community.

by *Miranda Reiman*



PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

Cattlemen are often drawn to their profession because of the solitude it offers, but some challenges, questions or situations still call for two-way conversations. Since bovines can't offer more than listening ears, many producers seek out their peers for advice.

It's always been that way, but modern technology has created more questions while presenting solutions. Thanks to the Internet, the past two decades have broadened the conversation. What was once just among neighbors now includes voices from around the world. One of the earliest avenues for trading ideas on the world-wide web came in the form of e-mail discussion lists, often referred to as listservs after the popular LISTSERV® software often involved.

For more than 10 years the Black-Ink list, hosted by Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB), has served as a virtual roundtable for producers, academia and allied industry professionals who share an interest in high-quality beef production.

►**Above:** Jeff Parker, of Highview Ranch at Enterprise, Ore., says he tries to keep engaged with the Black-Ink list to stimulate innovative thought processes.

"I joined to both learn and contribute or help," says Steve Lucas, a natural resources consultant who manages 40 Angus-cross cows in Virginia. "In generations past, if you had a problem or issue you needed advice on, you could go down to the feed store, sit around the stove or hang out on the porch and get everyone's opinion.

"Today that aspect of country life is mostly gone in the rush of getting from here to there," he says. "Yet, posting a question on any of the still active listservs will generally produce at least three or four responses from experts — either by education, position or experience — in a few hours time."

He is just one of approximately 400 members of the list, which first began as an electronic element of *Beef Today* magazine.

Beginnings

"BeefToday-L started in 1995 as a discussion group on all things related to beef cattle, along the lines of the existing listservs of the 1990s, Graze-L, Beef-L and Swine-L,"

says Steve Suther, who was then an editor with that magazine.

"It was the first effort to tie the beef print with the web," says Steve Cornett, now editor emeritus with *Beef Today*, who was a contributor in those days. "There was a section in the magazine called, 'Caught in the Net,' that featured parts of the e-mail discussions."

In 1998, Suther came to CAB as director of industry information and started a producer list. Three years later, the lists merged under the new name, Black-Ink. Like its namesake, the "Black Ink" monthly column that runs in farm and ranch newspapers across North America, the list aims to help producers find ways to enhance profitability.

Stimulating discussion

A few years ago, noting that the list had been idle, Suther asked members to post their ideas, "from big picture to nuts-and-bolts on the ranch. Perhaps there are few truly new ideas, but there are new ways of looking at all of them."

Jeff Parker, of Highview Ranch at

Enterprise, Ore., says he tries to keep engaged with the list.

"It's hard for me to get away, but I can sit here in the office having breakfast in the morning and have my mind stimulated," he says. Before coming home to operate his family's ranch, which now consists of 300 registered and commercial Angus cattle, Parker worked in animal health and bull stud businesses.

"With the background I have, where I traveled everywhere and talked with people, when you get isolated in your own operation, it's difficult to stimulate your innovative thought processes," he says.

Although ranching in the high mountain valleys of Oregon differs tremendously from Lucas's intensively grazed Virginia pastures, both say they learn from the differences. They have made virtual friendships with producers from across the country and have even met some of their online pals at industry meetings.

"The Internet as a whole has really revolutionized rural agriculture more than any other business I can think of, in that you are instantly connected to the outside world," Parker says. "People living in big cities are probably getting their information the same way I am, and that puts me on a level playing field."

Extension employees and other industry professionals weigh in on discussions ranging from grazing and weaning to calf prices and carcass grading.

"I love cattle — on pasture, in the yard, in the showing, on my dinner plate — but the reason I monitor the Black-Ink list is from a work aspect," says Teresa Martin, carcass data collector and owner of CattleTrail Inc. "Every once in a while a producer chooses to discuss items that relate to tracking of cattle and carcass data. While I have only replied a couple [of] times, most of the concerns and discussions are interesting to me."

Reply to contribute

Suther once noted that list members "can be like people sitting silently in an auditorium, or we can begin to talk about the weather, marketing, feeding, management, strategies and other things that relate to producing high-quality beef in the U.S."

"We have had a lot of new people join, but none of you have posted any comments or questions for us to bat around or share perspective on. Remember, nothing happens on this list unless you make it happen by clicking 'Reply.' Put in a new subject line if you want to start a new topic."

To stimulate dialogue now, CAB supply development staffers take turns posting comments each week.

"We want input from the producers we are trying to serve; we know that everyone

Rhyme time

A fan of old cowboy music married an English teacher and together they raised a modern-day cowboy poet.

Steve Lucas, who owns an Angus-based cow herd with his wife, Margaret, near Louisa, Va., credits his parents with sparking his writing interest.

He has shared his brand of prose with Black-Ink list subscribers since its inception. His inspiration is "real life," and no doubt many farmers and ranchers nod their head in agreement when they read lines like,

*When he comes home late, he'll leave his muddy boots right at the door,
And a mound of manury blue jeans piled on the bedroom floor ...*

or

*I think it might be just a bit absurd.
That a feller can ride around all day,
Docterin' calves and haulin' hay,
In a truck that's worth more than his whole herd.*

He likes his poetry to be conversational and natural, Lucas says, so writing on demand can be a challenge.

"I've got poems scattered around the house on pieces of paper, a bunch on computer hard drives that crashed some years ago and several unfinished ones bouncing around in my head that have never been seen on paper," he says. "I'll be doing something, or hear something or remember something and think, 'I should write a poem on that.'"

To check out some of his poems in their entirety visit, www.ibiblio.org/farming-connection/ruralwri/lucas/home.htm.



PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE LUCAS

benefits from hearing about all the different ways other producers deal with situations," Suther says.

Many lists have now evolved into discussion boards, Cornett says. "But if you get a subset of producers with a specific interest, the listservs are still going strong."

The Black-Ink list appeals to like-minded cattlemen and women for that reason.

"I have been an Arizona rancher for 34 years, but only decided to make a major effort to significantly increase the carcass quality of my herd five years ago," says subscriber Chuck Backus. "I don't have too many fellow ranchers who have similar interests, and I find that the people who respond to the listserv share my goals and contribute to my education and understanding."

Recent topics include electronic identification (eID), marketing methods, sexed semen, winter supplementation and creep feeding.

Jerry Gustin, Gloucester, Va., who says he joined the list to form a closer connection to CAB, now looks forward to the e-mails that arrive in his inbox.

"Even on issues where I think I know the answer, I always get to see a response from

another point of view that can make me rethink my position," he says. "I especially like the fact that people who respond are honest and frank in voicing their opinion. They're not afraid to offer an opposing point of view."

Much has changed since the early days of the list.

Cornett recalls getting an individual e-mail response from a professor once saying, "I hate to tie up bandwidth replying to the listserv, but I'd like to chat with you about this."

Today, that's not usually a concern. Cell phones, the Internet and e-mail are common parts of everyday life for most people.

"I'm not keen on adopting technology just because it's there," Lucas says. "It has to have a payback either in dollars, time saved or some other tangible benefit."

In this case, the profit comes in the form of ideas. It's hard to put a price tag on that, but when the technology it takes to get them costs almost nothing, few can argue with the return on that investment.

To join the CAB Black-Ink list, visit www.cabpartners.com/listserv.php.

Editor's Note: Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

