

MANITOBA

Farmers' Voice

WINTER 2016
EDITION

KAP The Official Publication of
Keystone Agricultural Producers

MEMBER PROFILE

LEN EPP

From hard times during the BSE crisis, to great times in the rebounding bison market

PROTECTING LIVESTOCK FROM PREDATORS

As predation rises, producers are looking at different ways to prevent it

AG DIPLOMA PROGRAM

Graduating young farmers with an eye for business management



Bison rebound

Bison producer Len Epp enjoying new opportunities in the market

BY GORD GILMOUR

LEN EPP OF ROCKWOOD Bison, which is based at the old Guntton Bull Test Station, says he started in the bison business by accident, after his then-girlfriend's father bought a few animals and founded the operation in the 1990s.

"I'd been around animals and agriculture most of my life with some uncles that were in the cattle business, so when he started the herd it was only natural that I began working with the animals," Epp said.

Fast forward a few years, and Len and his girlfriend had married and started a family — and his now father-in-law was starting to think about retirement.



Bison are large, powerful animals — and they don't like or trust their human handlers. Along with retaining their wild nature, they continue to have near-perfect adaptation to the Prairies' harsh and cold climate.

“That’s when we took over the herd,” Epp said.

It was a rocky start, though, as BSE sideswiped the bison business while at the same time hitting cattle head on. Bison producers found the U.S. border — and thus the major slaughter facility — closed to their animals.

These days, however, that stream of animals is flowing again, and if anything the industry is now struggling to make sure those that want the product can get it.

“There’s just tremendous opportunity in the bison business right now,” Epp said. “We just can’t keep up with demand.”

In fact, his operation’s location is a sign of the rebound in the industry, having come on the market after the bull test station fell victim to the BSE crisis. Filled with bison, its solid handling system is ideal for these large and powerful animals.

With the third-largest herd in the country, at about 14,000 head, Manitoba producers are poised to reap the benefits of this stronger market. The largest herds are in Alberta, then Saskatchewan, concentrating the animals largely in what would have been their natural range.

HIGH DEMAND

A big part of the high bison demand is the meat’s healthy low-fat image that’s seen it become a darling of health-conscious consumers, though Epp, who heads the Manitoba Bison Association, makes a point of saying he has no interest in bad-mouthing other products to gain market share.

“I don’t like to say it’s better or healthier,” he explained. “I just like to say it’s another option, with its own benefits. One happens to be that it’s low fat. My kids say it’s a bit sweeter than beef and they really like that flavour. But both it and beef are good and healthy products, as are pork and chicken.”

Tabitha Langel is on the front lines of the growing demand for bison at the

trendy Forks Market in downtown Winnipeg, where her company’s Tall Grass Prairie Bakery and Grass Roots Prairie Kitchen serves up ready-to-eat meals for busy families. Their bison recipes, which have all been well-received by customers, include meatballs, lasagna, burgers and shepherd’s pie.

“They’re very popular, and I think that’s something that’s here to stay — it really seems to have legs, because it’s such a good story,” she said.

By that she means customers are attracted to the health benefits and like the fact it’s a low-fat red meat they can incorporate in their diets. As well, there’s a real interest in these animals, their history, and how they’ve come back from the brink of extinction because of bison producers, she says.

“I think there’s regret at how that resource was squandered years ago, and this is a way to enjoy it today, to support it today,” she explained, referring to the often-wasteful buffalo hunts of the Old West.

Epp says the typical customer and the outlet they get the meat from reflects this desire for the story, and for a value that goes beyond simple nutrition. Consumers are affluent and are frequently consuming bison at high-end restaurants or buying it through specialty food stores.

He says that’s a bit of a double-edged sword, though, because while it’s good to be seen as a unique and differentiated product, those high-end restaurant sales are relying on a healthy overall economy — and are the first to start to dry up when times get a bit tougher.

A DIFFERENT ANIMAL

The fact that these animals roamed the North American plains by the millions just 150 years ago highlights a real challenge to bison producers, Epp said. Unlike their cousins in the cattle business, they’re still basically dealing with a wild animal, and that makes handling them difficult. >>



“To be honest, the last thing we want to do is domesticate these animals. They require so little tending.... We really want to keep them wild.”



Len Epp has filled the old Gunton Bull Test station with bison — and is finding high demand and good prices.

They're large, powerful animals — and they don't like or trust their human handlers. Staying safe for those working with them requires vigilance and specialized handling equipment like a modified bobcat and heavy-duty chutes and corrals — something that obviously costs more than a few dollars.

"That up-front cost definitely keeps some people out of the business, but the trade off is once you've made it, they require so much less handling," Epp said.

“ There's just tremendous opportunity in the bison business right now... We just can't keep up with demand.”

That's because, unlike cattle, which originated in Europe and Asia, bison evolved in this much harsher and more challenging climate. Along with retaining their wild nature, they continue to have their near-perfect adaptation to this harsh and cold place.

They even thrive on the native grass species that cattle turn their noses up at, they handle the cold winters with little shelter — in fact frequently snubbing the available shelter — and they don't typically suffer from many of the common cattle diseases.

"They are so tough, and so well adapted to the Prairies and our climate," Epp said. "To be honest, the last thing we want to do is domesticate these animals. They require so little tending. There's no AI, no surrogate cows, you don't have to help them with births. We really want to keep them wild."

That's not to say there aren't some drawbacks to the animals when compared to cattle. For example, they gain weight a bit more slowly — somewhere around two or 2.5 pounds a day com-

pared to beef cattle gaining three to four pounds a day.

"You just can't push them to gain weight in the same way," Epp said.

He also noted that marketing can be a bit more challenging since the market is smaller and there are less potential outlets, though he said that's not a huge problem at this point in the price cycle, when all the available animals are finding homes.

In fact, he says that the higher prices are actually causing the herd size to decline, as older producers take the opportunity to exit the business.

That, combined with the three-year commitment that's involved in retaining cows to build the herd, will likely mean shorter supplies and strong prices for the next while. Epp is cautious, however, about the long term, noting high prices typically carry the seeds of their own destruction.

"As a farmer, you like to see the high prices in the restaurant or grocery store, because you know you're going to get some of that," he said. "But that can only go on so long before people start making different choices, bringing demand down."

It's especially a risk for a new product like bison that's still very much a specialty product, despite the recent market growth, and is easy to leave in the meat case in favour of cheaper alternatives like pork or chicken.

Epp said the sector isn't just outside the marketing mainstream — it's also a small player in the much larger agriculture industry, meaning it can be tough to have bison producers' voices heard on important issues. For that reason he sees a lot of value in the fact that the bison association is a member of Keystone Agricultural Producers.

"I think KAP has a lot more experience with things like communications and lobbying government, and they do an excellent job of that for us," he said. "When KAP speaks, people listen. They're very well respected, and so influential. I don't think we could accomplish that ourselves, not at the same level." MFV

Apply today for the Farmland School Tax Rebate

The Manitoba government is offering a rebate of up to 80% of the school taxes levied on your farmland for 2015



This rebate is part of the government's ongoing commitment to help support the rural economy and provide tax relief to farm families.

How it works

If you are a Manitoba resident who owns farmland in Manitoba and you paid your 2015 property taxes, you may be eligible for the rebate. Your farmland does not have to be in cultivation or used for grazing to be eligible for the rebate. The rebate applies only to the school taxes assessed on your farmland and does not apply to residences or buildings.

How to apply

If you received a rebate for 2014, a 2015 application form was mailed to you. You can also download an application form from masc.mb.ca or pick one up from your local Manitoba Agricultural Services Corporation (MASC) office, Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development Growing Opportunities (GO) Office or municipal office.

Your application must be received by MASC by the **March 31, 2016** deadline.

For more information:

Website: masc.mb.ca/fstr

Email: fstr@masc.mb.ca

Phone: 204.726.7068

MASC
Manitoba Agricultural Services Corporation
Lending and Insurance
Building a strong rural Manitoba

Manitoba 



**CEREALS • FORAGE • CANOLA
SOYBEANS • SEED TREATING**



**WHEAT CITY
SEEDS** LTD

Allan Martin

Phone: (204) 727-3337 Fax: (204) 729-0494

wheatcityseeds@gmail.com

Box 74, Site 30, RR 2 . Brandon, Manitoba . R7A 5Y2

Help tell the real story of Canadian agriculture

Be an **AG**vocate

Our industry needs more advocates

To reach its **full potential**, agriculture needs everyone in the industry to speak up and speak positively.

Agriculture More Than Ever is an industry-driven cause to improve perceptions and create **positive dialogue** about Canadian ag. Together we can share the facts and stories about this vibrant and modern industry, and tell the world why we love what we do.

It's up to all of us to be **advocates** and it's easier than you think - visit AgMoreThanEver.ca and find out how you can get involved.



Keystone Agricultural Producers are a proud partner of this cause