



When it comes to feed,
Vernon Bridge cattle
producer finds it pays
to mix things up

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What amounts to an eight-foot-high food processor is changing the way beef cattle eat at FRJ Drake Farm in Vernon Bridge and it is resulting in healthier animals and a fatter bottom line.

Twice a day, Jonathan Drake, his brother, Randy, or his father, Francis, use a front-end loader to dump two round silage bales, 2,000 pounds of corn silage, 2,000 pounds of grain, up to 2,000 pounds of potatoes and a measured mix of nutrients into their Segue 5T Total Mixed Ration (TMR) mixer.

Powered off a tractor, eight cutting blades in the vat slice and mix the ingredients, producing in the two sessions about 20,000 pounds of moist, sweet-smelling shredded feed every day.

Since buying the mixer last year with assistance from the Agriculture Research and Innovation Program, part of the federally and provincially funded Canadian Agricultural Partnership, the Drakes have been getting their cattle to the Atlantic Beef Products processing plant in Borden-Carleton in less time and with less feed.

“They are growing a lot faster, probably an additional half-pound to a pound more a day, and we are seeing less stress in the animals and less wasted feed,” says Jonathan.

For the Drakes, the meal is the deal when it comes to their 475-head cattle operation.

As finishers, they bring in cattle when they weigh between 500 and 800 pounds and, over the course of a year, grow them to a market weight of between 1,300 and 1,500 pounds.

The animals are grouped by size, each weight category getting different feed rations.

An average beef animal eats about 50 pounds of feed a day.

By growing their own feed, the Drakes have been able to diversify and nutritionally fortify their herd's diet with barley, grass silage, high-energy corn silage and cull potatoes from their 350-acre potato production, which adds some sugar, starches, and moisture to the feed.

With all these different feed options, Jonathan Drake admits it was difficult to get the proper feed to each group.

“A big problem was the strongest cattle were getting to the feed first and taking the best parts and leaving the weaker animals with less choice and less to eat,” says Jonathan. “We had animals bloating because they were eating too much of one thing and sometimes they choked on the potatoes.

“We were also losing about half a bale a week in each pen as the feed was being trampled and spoiled under hooves as the cattle tore apart the bales.”

The mixer method takes away the pick and choose option, giving every animal the same meal, a total mixed ration.

“With everything mixed together, we know what all of our cattle are eating and that makes it a lot easier to properly set our rations for each size group, including the amount of minerals we add.”

A local feed company gives the farm a feed analysis every month, allowing them to make modifications to the feed as needed.

“The cattle are growing faster, which means they are getting to their target weights faster,” says Jonathan. “We are getting an additional gain of at least half a pound a day, and that means we are getting cattle out the doors maybe 30 days sooner.

“That’s a lot of feed saved and less land needed to grow that feed, freeing it up to be used for other things.”

Jonathan has also seen a difference in the behavior of his cattle on the mixed diet.

“They are not fighting to get at the food. They all have more time to eat, and they spend more time lying down because they get fuller quicker. They do look better.”

Jonathan says his family has always been open to trying new things and being innovative. That’s even more true these days.

“We’ve got two young fellows coming up, my son who just finished Grade 11 and my nephew who graduated from Grade 12, and they are both interested in the farm.

“We owe it to them to keep on progressing.”

