

WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT – WHAT WOULD G.E. DICKERSON SAY TO BIF TODAY?

*Ronnie D. Green
Future Beef Operations, LLC
Parker, CO 80138-7838*

Introduction

It is very fitting that BIF has provided an opportunity at its 2002 annual meeting, being held in the Cornhusker state, to reflect upon the contributions of a “transplanted” Cornhusker. As referenced by Mike Tess in the previous presentation, Gordon Dickerson would not want us to dwell on him personally tonite. He would want us to ask probing, deep questions, and more importantly, he would expect us to provide some answers!

To say that Gordon had an immense impact on all of us in this room is indeed a gross understatement. He touched the lives not only of all of us engaged in the beef industry, but had equally important impacts on the dairy, poultry, swine, and sheep industries as well, reaching across the globe.

My wife and I married in Lincoln under Gordon and Myra’s watchful eye. We have found ourselves on many occasions in the 16 years, four children, and three professional moves since asking, what would Gordon tell us to do now? We count it as the greatest of blessings to have shared part of the road with Gordon and Myra and they will always be with us.

As usual, when it came to Gordon, somehow he managed to assign me to “tasks” which I found to far exceed my capabilities. Tonight is no exception, where the task is to ask how he would encourage BIF in 2002 and beyond. The important part of that statement is the word *encourage*. That is exactly what he would do to us tonite were he here physically amongst us.

Words of Encouragement

In the 34 years since BIF was founded, it has cleared the path to allow genetic improvement to go from baby steps to learning to walk. Standardization of performance recording, exchange of ideas and information via annual symposia and seven special genetic prediction workshops, and continual prodding to spur the seedstock industry forward have been hallmarks of the effect of BIF on the beef industry. Even with all of these past accomplishments, perhaps the greatest challenges still lie ahead.

Gordon was exceptionally talented at asking questions. Here are a few he might be prone to ask us all to consider:

- 1) What exactly is the breeding objective of the beef industry? Is it definable? Is BIF taking an active role in continually refining this definition?
- 2) We have heard about biological efficiency and economic efficiency of beef production tonight. We have been talking about multi-disciplinary “systems” approaches to defining genetic change now for the best part of the last three decades. BIF has been the leader in defining the measurement of traits in the beef industry. Has BIF accelerated the movement of breeding systems to a true “systems” approach? Decision support systems such as the DECI model – has BIF played its full role here or is there much yet to be done? Is there need for standardization of EPD \$ in which BIF can take the lead?
- 3) Much has been made about the efficiency of beef production in comparison to swine and poultry. Given that reproductive rate is the limiting factor in making further advances in the efficiency of beef production, and, that maintenance energy cost of the cowherd is the resulting economic efficiency “opportunity area”, what role is BIF playing to define economically relevant traits, in a standardized form? Be vigilant – whole herd inventory reporting is important. Your annual meeting symposium program this year is right on target and shows movement in this direction.
- 4) Always remember that the consumer is the boss. BIF’s contribution should be focused on how to provide a better product at a cheaper price. In reviewing your symposia programs over the past decade, the emphasis has seemed to be on one (ie product attributes –or- “efficiency of production”). Is there a way to have defined focus on both simultaneously? This is the challenge that is faced every day by the commercial cattle producer, and thus should be the same for BIF and its clientele.
- 5) One must wonder about why the beef industry has not yet fully utilized the concept of hybrid production. The grain industry, followed by poultry and swine have made tremendous strides through the utilization of hybrids and composites. Many suggestions have been offered as to why the beef industry has not moved in this direction. Has BIF played its role fully here? BIF has never been a breed organization, but neither has it played the fullest role of leader in truly speaking for healthy changes needed in the seedstock structure of the industry. Huge challenges lie ahead in this area. Will BIF be a leader in addressing them or will it choose to sit by the sidelines?

- 6) BIF has taken an active role in keeping the industry informed on developments in the understanding of the bovine genome. It is truly amazing what has been accomplished in this area in the last decade. Don't let your guard down in this area. As developments continue which move to commercial use in the industry, play the role of standardization carefully. Be sure to make everyone cognizant of the fact that it is the interaction of genes and their alleles which must be understood before DNA technologies can have their desired effects in facilitating further genetic improvement.
- 7) It is critical that BIF play a role in continuing the research, extension, and teaching roles in the beef cattle breeding area in the US and abroad. The pressures are many and great as our society and its perceived needs change. How many of us would have guessed the need for so many federal dollars devoted to "bioterrorism"? The declining number of "beef cattle breeders" entering the research arena is troubling for the beef industry. Movement in directions such as the National Beef Cattle Genetic Evaluation Consortium is excellent. BIF has a huge role to play in assuring that the resources are available to attract more of the best and brightest young people to this worthy profession. As continued privatization of beef cattle breeding continues, accelerated by genomics and bioinformatics, public research and information dissemination becomes even more important. BIF's Frank Baker Essay Competition is an excellent example of the right kind of encouragement. Ask yourself, however, can you do more? Is BIF using its financial resources to the fullest for this purpose?
- 8) The beef industry is at the beginning of a major transition. More companies and alliances, new marketing methods, more rather than less information, more privatization of information, increasing reliance on "hi-tech", can all be seen as "a glass half empty". Strive, however, for BIF to set the tone for the industry in seeing these as a "glass half full". We all understand the fear of change, BIF can and must serve in a role to not fear, but rather positively facilitate these changes as they occur.
- 9) It is amazing to see how many industry resources are wasted on antiquated promotional efforts within breeds. BIF can and should play a role in redirecting the dollars wasted in non-economically important pursuits, eg. the show ring, toward some of the needs identified above.

If Gordon were here tonight he would have no doubt managed to put all of the above nine questions / categories in to one huge path coefficient diagram to "explain all of the causes and effects" and allow us to "more clearly see" the big picture. I recall at his retirement party at the University of Nebraska in 1986 being asked to speak on behalf of the graduate students. We formally "retired" his notebooks of such graphics and diagrams at that time, so as never to perplex

another student. I have thought at many times in the past two years how much those “Dickersonian slides” taught us all.

In thinking about what he would conclude for us tonight, it would be relatively simple. Each of us, in the varied roles we play in this industry and in BIF, must take on the hard questions and give it our best effort to identify the right answers. At the end of the day, we will hopefully be able to say that we did what was important for the consumers of the products that we make from the natural resources God gave us to use. Through those efforts we will have improved the lives of countless others. That, at the end of the day, was what defined Gordon Edwin Dickerson.

Gordon commonly “graded” my work by simply putting Q.E.D. at the bottom of the page. The question he leaves us with tonight is, has BIF reached the point of *Quite Enough Done?* The answer is obvious.