

What I Learned from Pigs

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This presentation is part of an on-going BIF educational initiative to “look over the fence” at competing meat production chains and perhaps learn from the changes in their industries and genetic improvement programs. Though our paths are not perfectly parallel nor are we destined for exactly the same paradigm changes, we are each charged with genetic improvement for all segments including product quality and acceptability as our competitors. By learning from the experiences of others with whom we share similar protein businesses, we should be able to make our own changes with greater security and with plans that make for a smoother transition to the future. Coincidentally, my experience and stories begin in 1973, just a few years after the creation of BIF.

I was fortunate to grow up in the Purebred swine seedstock business in central Illinois during a time of significant success and prosperity for that industry. Unfortunately, for most of the producers with whom I shared the success of the day, the good times were fleeting and few predicted the magnitude of the changes to come. With immense structural changes in the larger swine industry that included a move to large systems-based models of production and accountability at all levels, most independent seedstock producers were unable and or unwilling to make the changes necessary to service a changing industry and a changing customer. The resulting

failure of thousands of independent seedstock businesses was difficult to watch as a young person who saw many of those producers as both mentors and friends.

Beginning with timelines, industry details and voices from the past, I hope to show patterns of opportunities and missed opportunities which plagued the independent seedstock production model that dominated the swine industry of the past. My hope is to show pattern similarities to the changing beef genetics business. Though there may be no perfect model for genetic improvement and seedstock production that doesn't require more change to tradition than is palatable to some, by doing a better job of predicting change, all of us have a better chance to be successful in the future.

Paradigm changes in the beef business will surely be unique and are much slower to manifest than those in the swine, poultry or even dairy industries, but change is happening. The beef genetics business absolutely has the opportunity today to help lead the way to a more profitable future for the entire industry should we choose to. The second and more painful option is for the seedstock industry to simply follow along reacting to adjustments it could have predicted and repeat the failure cycle of other businesses. Working with and supporting the Beef Improvement Federation is a great place to start.