



Don't fence me in

April showers kick-start the grazing season for much of North America. It's a great time to think about fencing and fences, both literal and metaphorical.

The literal kind usually keeps animals where we want them. Sure, a tree can fall on a fence, flood gaps can wash out or bulls can obliterate a rod or two. That's why fences have to be maintained. But most of the time, if they are dependable and well built, we take them for granted and so do the animals.

There are snow, corral and security fences to trap, contain or control. All but the snow fence can be designed to use electricity. By definition, a fence is less than a wall, and animals can usually see through it.

Some fences are barely there, and easily violated by the first cow that hungers for what's on the other side. That may be all right for a subdivision within your property, but obviously not for the perimeter where cattle can get out on a road or mixed up with your neighbor's.

A single strand of energized hot wire set off from an old fence can defibrillate a rusting line into new life. Then, the trick is to keep current flowing through all kinds of weather.

Psychology comes into play when considering effectiveness. Once a herd tries the electric fence, they learn not to check it often. Pigs that get used to an electric fence boundary cannot be driven across the line for days after the line is removed.

No matter how good any fence seems, it can be a one-way gate. A baby calf may wake up on the wrong side, or startle through before it knows what happened. Seldom can it get back in without help.

Maybe people are more like critters than we like to admit. We are controlled by metaphorical fences, some of our own design, some erected by others. We stay within certain social boundaries, and those fences extend to what we try in the front pasture for everyone to see.

A recent survey of cow-calf producers reveals more than two-thirds have never fed their cattle or sold cattle based on carcass merit. Moreover, 94% of them have no plans to try. Most of those who follow no health program for their calves have no plans to begin one in the next three years.

What fences keep us from even thinking about some options? Who put up those fences and how long ago? Who maintains them? If they are hotwires, is the fencer even plugged in? New ideas could have grounded the circuit. Remember, fences are less than walls, and there are ways to defeat them, if they even still exist.

Maybe you stay far from the fence, or maybe you're walking it like a newly weaned calf, or with more intensity, like a caged lion. Charge the fence to test it now and then.

Sometimes we find ourselves on the outside looking in, but if we ruminate on our plight, we can usually find a way though, or even a key to the gate.

The old cowboy song pleads, "Don't fence me in." Psychologists have interpreted it as fear of discipline or commitment, but the key to that fence is the opportunity presented by interdependence and cooperation in today's beef industry.

You can still sing that song, but add some lyrics to clarify: You don't want anybody putting limits on your options or defining what you do in too narrow a sense. The sky, if that, is your limit.

Not all metaphorical fences are bad, obviously.

Most fences start and end with corner posts, and there are stands that anchor your life and business. If you are on the fence about something, get more information, climb down and get on with life. Riding fences provides time to think, and mending fences is synonymous with making things right with family or neighbors.

Fence your cattle in so they stay where you want them. But don't be so easily controlled yourself. Wake up on the other side a time or two. Let your imagination run free. Next time in *Black Ink*, we'll look at reproductive physiology. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail

steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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