

International Livestock Congress 2006 Student Experience

Prior to my arrival in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, I was greatly concerned about this trip to the International Livestock Congress. I had only been home for a month, working full time then coming home to work on the farm, and had not gotten much rest or time to myself, and didn't feel ready to travel again. However, on the plane ride there I began running into some of the wonderful people who made my experience at the ILC 2006 a great and memorable one. The students, leaders, speakers, and general public around Calgary, the ILC, and the Calgary Stampede were all genuine, warm, easy to talk to, and easy to learn from individuals, and gained a great deal from attending this conference.

The first person I met when I exited customs was a representative from the Simmental Association, who also had their conference during the Calgary Stampede. She was extremely nice and helpful to me in finding the cheapest possible ride to the hotel. She also gave me her card and asked me to visit her and her family where they exhibited their cattle at the Calgary Stampede, which I was able to do that Saturday. I rode to my hotel in a shuttle with a group of Wyoming ranchers, and got checked in and settled in to the hotel. The first evening was fun, simply doing introductions and meeting the other participants, and watching the band. I even convinced a few of the guys to dance! A small group of us also visited the waterslide, pool, and hot tub later that evening.

The next day was my favorite of the trip. It began with a tour of Cargill's beef packing plant outside of the city. I was aware, being from the United States, that Canada had increased their packing capacity a great deal since the BSE scares and border closures, but what really impressed me was some of the research and technologies being performed and implemented in the plant. I was also extremely impressed by the size and speed of the lines. The plant overall

was comparable to any that I've toured in the United States, though not as large as some, but certainly as efficient and safe. The pathogen research lab was impressive; I would have liked to spend more time taking a closer look in that area, but do understand the security issues. In talking with the Canadian Beef representative in the boardroom, I was impressed with the simplicity and implementation of their animal ID and trace-back system. I recently spent a few weeks in Australia, where I learned about their animal ID systems and was unimpressed by the fact that once an animal entered the slaughter plant they lost track of its source. In Canada, by keeping them in lots and not releasing the lot until tests are completed, they create a simple way to make sure that food is safe when it enters the chain, and can track that group of products on into the food system. As compared to Australia, this tracking system seems more reasonable, cost effective, user friendly, and effective, and I believe could be applied in the United States as well.

The next stop on the trip was at Western Feedlots, where I met several awesome people who I talked to throughout the conference. First we listened to a few speakers in the garage, and then had a fabulous lunch where I got to sit with a recent Ph.D. graduate from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln who was hired on at Western Feedlots for nutrition management. One of the primary things I learned in conversations with him and other workers at the feedlot was that their primary ingredient in cattle feed is not corn, like the United States, but rather barley. I was completely unaware that you could feed cattle out well on a high-barley diet, and was shocked and intrigued about their feed mixes. I also talked with the president/CEO, Dave Plett, and the on-staff veterinarian about his job. I definitely felt that networking was an important part of the International Livestock Congress for myself and the other participants, since the beef industry specifically is where I would like to find my career. After lunch and snapping a few photographs,

we boarded the bus and traveled to the feedlot, which was not far off. The cattle mostly appeared similar to the type found in any United States feedlot, so that was nothing special, but I was impressed and the sloping of the pens and the excellent drainage they appeared to have. I was also a little surprised by the high solid wooden fences between pens, until I realized that I was in Canada where it snows and gets much colder than Oregon, where I'm from, and the cattle need protection from the elements. At that point I asked about the difference in performance of animals between the winter and summer months, and was told that there is not a lot of difference with proper management. We stopped at the working facilities and talked about the ID system that Western Feedlots has and how each animal's information, history, and health records can be accessed in seconds on the computer in the working shed. The data management system at the feedlot was incredible, I've never seen anything like it, and the process was so streamlined and simplified that anyone could handle it, even if they spoke little English! The next stop at the feedlot was on the way to the feed mixing bins, to look at a bunk and see what the animals ate. As I mentioned before, this was primarily a barley mix, with a few other grains and silage. We then drove up to the feed mixing area, where Western Feedlots mixes all of their own feed by bringing the raw materials in from contracts with local farmers, helping them out economically, and does all their own steaming, rolling, and mixing with minerals and silage to create the appropriate ration for the season and type of animals being fed, whether its weanling calves or back-grounded yearling steers. They had several huge silage pits (which I wanted to climb, but no one would go with me) and silos for grain storage. Overall, they were and technologically advanced feedlot with a great management team who had excellent insight to where the beef industry is headed.

The most surprising bit of information I learned during the entire ILC, I also began to hear about at the Western tours, and that was the severe shortage of labor in the Canadian agricultural industries. Starting wages of \$12.00 per hour are unheard of in agriculture in the U.S., but in Canada that is what some people are doing just to compete with the oil and other natural resource industries up north. Over the course of the weekend, I spoke with several speakers, ranchers, and other students about this labor issue, as labor is also a big issue in the United States with the tightening of security on our southern border. Through all of these discussions, no one seemed to have a solution for either nation's problem.

After leaving Western Feedlots, we toured one more place, Tongue Creek Feeders, where we just stayed on the bus and primarily listened to the owner talk about his waste management and disposal system, which was interesting. They were a smaller feedlot than the one we'd just visited at Western, though highly regarded, and their research and work with waste disposal and composting was well known. We finished this tour and headed back to the hotel through cropland and canola fields. I was amazed and excited to see canola fields. In western Oregon, where my family farms, canola is banned as a crop due to pollination issues and crossbreeding with other high-valued row crops. Now that it has gained recognition as a leading oil producer for biofuel production, my family members, among others, have been leaders in getting restrictions changed so that Oregon can produce its own biodiesel. I was happy to see all the canola and hope that someday soon bright yellow fields will exist in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, as well. Interestingly enough, biofuels were a leading topic of conversation and several speakers mentioned or spoke on the subject the next day at the ILC and at the roundtable Saturday morning.

After a short break and change of clothes, all of the student participants attended a reception with some of our hosts, coordinators, and sponsors that make the ILC and the student program possible. This included Dave Plett from Western Feedlots and several of his employees, who I spoke with, as well as some individuals from the media who myself and another student from Saskatchewan spoke with for much of the evening. Each of the students also got a chance to have a few seconds on stage to introduce themselves, where they were from, what schools they attended, and what their interests were. It was obvious we had a diverse and strong group of students from several nations, including Brazil, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand. Meeting and talking with the international students was a great experience, because things are done so differently in some other nations. The individual from Brazil shocked me by informing me that there are no straight petroleum fuels left in that nation – you can only purchase E-25 or E-100, and all of their vehicles run on both. This fact amazed me. The student from New Zealand had never seen a large packing plant or feedlot before the way they are operated in Canada and the United States, and having a different perspective prompted her to raise questions that many of us from North America would never have thought about.

During the reception, one of the sponsors invited several of the students to ride with him and his employees to experience the nightlife in Calgary, Canada during the Calgary Stampede. So, after the reception, several students climbed in vehicles with them and went to Ranchmen's, a western club in Calgary. The inside was totally packed so we spent our evening in the huge, free, outdoor tent, where they had a dance floor, drinks, a live band, and a mechanical bull all set up. I rode the mechanical bull, which was awesome. Everyone was extremely nice and friendly, and I had a great time that evening.

The next day was the main program of the ILC, held at the Calgary Stampede grounds. The first speaker was Alanna Koch from the Canadian Agri-Food Trade Alliance, talking about agricultural trade issues and especially the WTO negotiations that are occurring currently. One of the things that created a new perspective for me is that Canada is primarily an exporting nation, while the U.S. is a huge consuming nation. Therefore, these WTO negotiations will affect Canada drastically in their agricultural industry, as they must have export markets to survive. It was interesting for me to talk with others in the agricultural industry from Canada about this issue, because it is the opposite perspective I usually get to see. I agreed with most of what Alanna had to say, as well. She mentioned the high meat subsidies in the EU, Norway, and Switzerland, which I was unaware of, because those subsidies create export problems for the Canadian beef and pork industries. She also mentioned that the major hold up of all WTO negotiations is agriculture, which I already knew, but that the WTO minister is actually traveling to the G6 nations (Brazil, Japan, Australia, China, EU, and the U.S.) to try and reach an agreement about agriculture. A statistic she quoted that amazed me was that 1/3 of Canadian jobs depends on exports, which is obviously why they are so concerned about the WTO negotiations. Alanna also made a prediction as to what would happen if there is no deal in the WTO. She felt that low-cost producers such as Brazil could control export markets, making it difficult for all of North America, and that bilateral agreements giving preferential access could replace the WTO agreements. Overall, she was an interesting speaker who provided me with a different perspective on trade issues, and one that I have discussed with others now that I'm back in the United States. As I enter graduate school to work on agricultural policy, and start looking at agricultural trade as a possible area of research, it will give me a better understanding of trade issues worldwide, rather than just in the U.S.

The next speaker, Glen Hodgson, gave an economic outlook for the industry. One of the things I agreed with him on was that the U.S. now has rising interest rates again and a questionable economic outlook, with the U.S. dollar falling against the Canadian dollar and the Euro, the bubble is going to burst. The only questions are when and how hard will the fall be? He had a quote that I found humorous and had to write down, "It's hard to fight a war in two countries and cut taxes at the same time." He also mentioned the U.S.'s continuing trade deficit, which is a concern to me and many other people in the United States. He made the projections that U.S. interest rates would stop rising next quarter, and that the Canadian dollar would reach parity with the U.S. dollar. The first projection I disagree with him on, I don't think the U.S. Federal Treasury is ready to decrease interest rates yet. The second prediction I do see as a distinct possibility in the near future.

Dennis B. McGivern was the next speaker who was originally from Calgary but moved to Tennessee. He continued the economic topic, with the exchange rate effect on the Canadian Cattle industry. He mentioned that Cargill and Excel are the two largest slaughter plant operators in Canada. Dennis felt that the strengthening dollar would trickle down as profits to the cow-calf producers, and that feedlots will have to adjust to higher prices. What I remember more about Dennis than his speech was riding the trolley from the hotel to the Calgary Stampede grounds with him. When I introduced myself, he asked me if I was related to R.L. Freeborn. I told him I had to be because the Freeborn family is one unbroken family, but that I didn't know him. He then informed me that R.L. lived in Oregon and raised Wagyu beef; I made a note at that point to look him up. After the ILC I looked up R.L.'s information online and sent him an e-mail asking how he was related to me. Not only did I get a response and figure out how he and his children are distant cousins of mine, but he also asked me to send a resume in case they had a position

open that might fit my interests. About one week later I received a phone call from him about a position opening, which I currently was unable to actually apply for because of attending graduate school, but I did travel to Redmond, Oregon to meet him and his family and learned that the Freeborn family has an English Coat of Arms dating back to the 1100's according to sources I found online. That was my greatest networking connection from the ILC, thanks to Mr. McGivern.

The next speaker discussed ethanol production, which was Brant Randles, and I later e-mailed him to get his presentation to use some information for a research project I had going on at work. After lunch, we had four more speakers. Doug Horner talked about the Canadian cattle ID system, which I had already mentioned I found to be a good system. David Baxter discussed the labor shortage problems that Canada has and that its labor resource is continuing to shrink. It's different, again, being in Canada and discussing the labor force because they do not have a migrant workforce from a nation like Mexico that the United States does, and that is a major part of the shortage. Professor Bernie Bindon from the UNE in Armidale, NSW, Australia also gave a presentation, but I had recently traveled to Australia and actually went to the UNE and seen the same presentation he gave, so I went into the hallway and discussed the labor shortage further with Mr. Baxter. The final speaker of the conference was David Hughes, who talked about global food trends and their effect on the overall industry. All of the speakers were interesting and well informed, and I was able to do a lot of networking in the breaks during the conference.

After the conference, we took a behind the scenes tour of the rodeo grounds at the Calgary Stampede, and learned about the Born to Buck program that the stampede's ranch has with their livestock. I also learned that they still actually drive the stock into town for the stampede, which I thought was amazing and could never be done anywhere in the United States!

We got to watch the chuck wagon races that evening and watch the grandstand show afterwards.

When I went home, the one thing I told the most people is that it was really weird being in another nation while a grandstand full of people sang their national anthem, because I didn't know it. I definitely felt a little out of place at that point!

The next day was a roundtable on biofuel production. I learned a lot of information at this roundtable discussion. The initial speaker had slides about all the different crops and products that could produce biofuels, and this was the first time I'd ever heard of ethanol from cellulose, which fascinated me because western Oregon is a major forestry and biomass producing area where this type of production could really explode! He mentioned that the basis is shifting in the United States for corn because Iowa is now a net importer of corn due to the number of ethanol plants. He also noted a decrease in soybean production. Another crop I didn't know could be used for ethanol is wheat, but Canada already uses CPS wheat for this purpose. He also talked about making biodiesel from canola, an interest of mine as I mentioned earlier. To summarize the comments that were made, different nations had numerous perspectives on biofuels. As I had mentioned, Brazil is ahead of the game in the use of biofuels already. Canada is having problems exporting the byproducts of production and getting feedlots to shift to using these byproducts in their cattle feed. Research is being conducted on what percentages of the Dried Distillers Grains (DDG's) can even be fed to livestock without the high sulfur and fat contents affecting the animals. Australia is concerned about the availability of raw materials for biofuel, as they have such strict import restrictions on most crops, which would have to change if they became a major player in biofuels. A gentleman from Texas mentioned the government driven mandates and tax incentives for biofuels in the U.S. driving the industry there, which is different than other nations in the world but seems to be effective. Overall, it was an interesting and lively discussion. Dave

Plett from Western Feedlots wrapped it up with a statement that I wrote down, "Leadership is being able to simplify complex issues into a simple solution." That statement I believe will be very true in the future of the biofuel industry worldwide.

After the roundtable was over, I finished packing, checked out, and rode with another student to the Calgary Stampede grounds, where I walked around for several hours and took in the sights. I also found the Simmental lady who had originally met me at the airport and met the rest of her family. She invited me to come and visit their place in Alberta anytime (an offer I will likely take her up on!). Overall, my experience at the ILC was a great one. I learned a lot on a number of diverse topics that I never expected to hear about when I initially arrived, and met some awesome individuals that I hope to stay in contact with. It is hard to summarize the experience, but it definitely far exceeded my expectations, and I strongly recommend that anyone who is interested attend the conference. I would do it again in an instant if given the opportunity! To close, I would like to thank Colorado State University for sponsoring my trip, and all of the people at the ILC for making this an enjoyable and memorable experience.