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Meet Brett McRae

Brett McRae is always on the go. The 29-year-old farmer and rancher is constantly looking for new and improved ways to maximize his farm's potential.

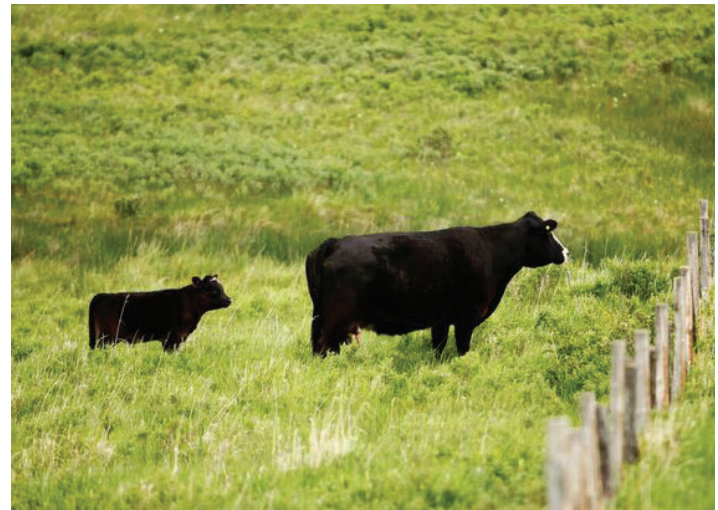
Working with his parents Blair and Lois and sister, Melissa, Brett is the fifth generation to operate on Mar Mac Farms, just southwest of Brandon, Manitoba. The McRaes raise purebred Red Angus, Black Angus, and Simmental cattle, and grow barley, wheat, oats, canola, and yellow peas, in addition to hay and forage corn.

"Our land base is very well suited to both cattle and crop production," Brett says. "The key for our farm going forward is to really integrate the cattle and the grain land together and get the best out of both — synergistically using the two together."

Brett says the McRaes are moving towards incorporating a greater diversity into their cropping system. He has previously grown winter cereals and plans to do so again this winter. In addition, he is looking forward to reaping the rewards of growing yellow peas for the first time, introducing a pulse crop to Mar Mac Farms.

"On the cattle side, I've moved my portion of the cows away from the traditional purebred system where they calve in January and February, to a later time in May," he says. "This will spread out our calving season and allow us to expand our cattle numbers without a huge increase in labour demands or having to build more buildings." It will also provide a different product the McRae's can offer for the market.

While most of the McRaes' cattle customers reside within a one-hour radius of Mar Mac Farms, Brett says the elite,



top 10 per cent of the herd, often travel farther. Where average sales range between \$4000 and \$6000, the best animals can reach the \$10,000 to \$20,000 range. Brett says this is where international interests come into play.

Brett says the family's purebred livestock definitely holds the farm's biggest export potential. While live cattle have been exported, genetics in the form of semen and embryos have the most international potential. He adds that their biggest buyer by far is the United States, but they have sent live cattle as far as Russia.

"U.S. buyers play a vital role in our sale when it comes to the top bulls. Especially when the dollar is in their favour."



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The McRae family at Mar Mac Farms. From left to right; top: Brett, Blair (father). Bottom: Lois (mother), Melissa (sister). Credit: Sarah Anderson, Right Cross Ranch.

Brett recently sold one of his own bulls to the U.S., giving him the experience of getting a live commodity across the border. "It's unfortunate that there is so much extra cost involved to sell a bull to someone only a few hours away, just because they are on the other side of a line on a map."

Lois and Melissa also had the opportunity to visit a buyer's farm in Kansas, where the family had sold a bred heifer (a young female cow). Later that year, she was shown at the National Western Stock Show in Denver.

"We went down for the show as a family," Brett says. "We were so proud to see one of our heifers shown at such a prestigious event. It was pretty neat."

This experience presented Brett the opportunity to compare the quality of cattle between the two nations.

"For being a lot smaller national herd here in Canada, our quality was right up there with the Americans. We might be biased, but we thought in the Red Angus breed, maybe even a little better," he laughs and repeats: "We might be a little biased."

While the McRaes are not immediately dependent on direct export, Brett says without it, they would certainly feel the pinch.

"Even though our farm may not always be selling those cattle directly, our customers are," he says. "They're using our bulls, and then selling their calves. If they're not getting as much money for their calves, they don't have as much to spend on our bulls. We are a little buffered, in that we're the last guy to take the hit, but we still feel it."

With that, Brett is keeping a close eye on trade agreements that hinge on U.S. involvement.

"The Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership is one that is going to be extremely important for Canada to be a player in," he says. "It matters to us whether the U.S. is going to be a part of the CPTPP." He stresses that this partnership is of extreme importance to the Canadian cattle industry.

"They are clearly our biggest trading partner," he says. "Having trade agreements with them is crucial to the livestock industry, and the ag industry as a whole."

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