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Burger chain wants more Canadian beef

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No hormones, steroids | A & W says its campaign has enticed consumers back to eating burgers

MEDICINE HAT, Alta. — A & W does not use hamburger derived from cull cows.

As well, it continues to buy some of the meat for its Canadian burgers from the United States and Australia.

Queried by producers during a Dec. 3 Farming Smarter conference, A & W purchasing vice-president Trish Sahlstrom said the fast food chain uses beef from animals younger than 36 months because it is the only available classification that guarantees cull cows are not used.

“We do not use cull cows, and we never have,” said Sahlstrom.

The point speaks to criticism from some in the cattle industry about A & W’s “better beef” campaign, which claims the beef used in hamburgers contains no added hormones or steroids.

Cull cows would not be given either one.

Sahlstrom said the company is unable to find enough product in Canada to meet its specifications. She declined to specify what percentage of A & W’s beef is bought in this country, noting only that “it’s not near enough.”

She said high beef prices might be working against the company’s goals to buy more product in Canada because producers are making money without altering their usual production methods.

Sahlstrom said feedlots are more of an impediment than packers for that reason.

However, she said she is meeting with some of the country's largest feedlot operators to encourage production of animals without using growth implants.

Many smaller producers have proven willing to supply the type of beef that A & W wants.

However, packing facilities must be federally inspected, and that is not the case for most smaller plants that handle fewer animals.

Sahlstrom said the company must have a way to verify its beef claims, so it buys from places that can provide that verification.

Spring Creek of Vegreville does this in Alberta, as does Meyer of Montana in the United States and Teys in Australia.

Sahlstrom said she is aware of the ire that her company's "better beef" campaign has raised in the beef industry.

"The beef industry did come out very strongly, initially, and say, 'we feel that in its comparison, it is suggesting everything else isn't good,' " she said. "That wasn't our intention, but if it made people feel badly or feel that they somehow were being put down by us for what they did ... that wasn't what our campaign was about.

"It was about giving consumers what they were asking for, so we didn't need to call it better beef. But it is the handle that has stuck, certainly, for the beef industry."

Sahlstrom said current ads make no mention of "better beef," but instead follow consumers' lead in specifically addressing the absence of added hormones and steroids.

As for the use of Australian product, she made no apology.

"In Australia, we were met with open arms. They were thrilled and delighted to supply that beef to us. That's a common specification for them. We still absolutely count on outside of Canada to meet our beef needs."

In contrast, Sahlstrom said the company found little interest among Canadian suppliers when it approached them about providing the desired product.

"Today, we're selling more beef and we're having our people tell us that they are coming back to eating burgers. It really has been a very good news story for our customers."

