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Cattle producers take DIY trend to pasture

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REGINA - Let your cattle work for you is a mission statement Jim Anderson is eager to advocate.

The Rimbey, Alta., rancher and his wife Jackie, developed the frost-free nose pump, a device that allows cattle to pump water for themselves.

"Our job is not to work for the animals. The job of the animals is to work for me," said Anderson.

"If we can get those cattle to do things for themselves, we don't have to buy energy, we don't have to buy diesel fuel, we don't have to work, we don't have to buy machinery. All of those things impact the cost of production and our profit."

The couple and a homemade mechanical cow were at the Farm Progress Show in June in Regina promoting the nose pump, where they picked up a best first-time exhibitor award.

Anderson estimated that their mechanical cow, named Elsie, pumped 3,040 litres (800 gallons) with no wear or tear on the pump's mechanism during a typical trade show day.

Elsie received lots of attention, particularly from children who wanted to poke it in the eyes or peel back the fake fur to see inside.

Anderson created the device in his home workshop because some of his ranchland has no opportunity for grazing due to a lack of water.

"I can't think of a worse job in the winter than hauling water. What an endless chore," he said. Since the BSE outbreak in 2003, there isn't enough profit in cattle to pay for expensive inputs like traditional electric systems, he said.

Anderson's innovation is a piston pump, modified so cattle can use their noses to push a lever. The pump pushes about a half-litre of water per push into the small enclosed trough.

"It's an old, old technology. The only thing we've really done is we've built a hood that the cattle can use their nose to do what we used to do with a handle."

Anderson said he has never had a pump freeze up in winter among the 600 units in use across North America. Young calves don't need a lot of water and the cows will train their young on how to use the pump. He wants to keep it as simple as possible.

"That's one of the things about our nose pump is we have no electronic stuff in it and those are always the fail points with any system."

Anderson said the frost-free nose pump is a rancher's solution to a rancher's problem.

"We don't jeopardize livestock performance by making them pump their own water ... it's no skin off their nose."

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