

Bounty on cattle thieves being boosted

With beef prices soaring, so is the reward for turning in cattle rustlers.

By Michael Platt, Calgary Sun
February 26, 2012

A rope and a good sturdy branch are no longer an option, or an effective deterrent for the lowlife curs stealing cows in Alberta.

Yes, cattle rustling still occurs here in the not-so-wild west, with more than 6,000 head stolen annually by thieves prowling the prairies for heifers to heist and sell.



With beef prices soaring, the number of animals vanishing is on the rise — and with the noose outlawed, cold hard cash is seen as the best weapon against modern-day rustlers.

“If you do the math, I’ve lost pretty close to half a million bucks, when you figure cows that would have calves and so on and so forth,” said Aaron Brower, a rancher and victim of repeated rustlings.

“Since 2004, when we first started noticing it, there’s been 25 calves here, 30 bred cows there — I’m at 164 losses so far, with 44 head this year alone.”

Stories like Brower’s are the reason the Western Stock Growers’ Association announced Sunday the reward for nabbing Alberta cattle thieves will immediately increase by up to 5,000%.

The old reward of \$1,000 for information leading to the arrest of cattle crooks wasn’t cutting it — and so the association is establishing the new reward, which will be doled out through the RCMP and Crime Stoppers.

Brower, a director with the stock growers, says he suspects Alberta’s rustlers are well organized, snatching up breeding cows and calves for sale out of province.

But modern agriculture crime still relies on old-fashioned methods — and Brower says it would take some traditional thieving tactics to round up cattle on his remote ranch, south of Medicine Hat.

“It’s pretty rough terrain out here, only one road in and out and I’m pretty sure they’re not using it,” said Brower.

“They’re probably going in on horses — probably horse and dog, I would assume.”

If saddle-bound villains stealing cattle seems a crime from another century, the cash to be made is very much 21st century.

Cows can fetch up to \$1,600, and with a trailer holding up to a dozen animals easily filled by experienced cattle herders, it's a lucrative and relatively easy business.

Ask Alberta ranchers and they'll blame the province two doors to the east, saying Manitoba doesn't have a recognition system capable of identifying stolen cattle by brand.

From Alberta, it's an overnight drive to Manitoba, and easy profit on the agriculture market where the stolen beasts are sold for meat or breeding.

Phil Rowland, president of the Western Stock Growers' Association, says the price of beef — which hit a 10-year high in 2011 — has encouraged cattle criminals to grow even more active.

"It's actually pretty bad," said Rowland.

He said there have been reports of other southern Alberta ranchers losing up to 40 head in the past year, while herds across the province have been victim to animals vanishing suspiciously.

It's difficult to pin down exact numbers — predators and mishaps can result in the occasional disappearance — but Rowland says ranchers are noticing multiple animals going missing at once.

A thriving black market for beef is behind the rustling resurgence, and Rowland says it's hoped the promise of large reward will get someone talking and help police.

"We're just looking to give one more tool to our RCMP officers," said Rowland.

No one is sure who is behind the thefts or handcuffs would already be snapping shut, but Rowland says it's clear police are searching for criminals with ranching experience.

"Were talking about someone who is familiar with cattle for one, because you'd need a certain amount of skill to get a load of cattle out of somebody's pen," he said.

"It's somebody who has a place to take them, and it wouldn't be that big a deal to get them to Manitoba, where they haven't got a brand inspection program.

"From there you go to an abattoir, or you calf them out and sell the calves — and the calves, of course, would be legitimate."

Hopefully, says Rowland, the promise of up to \$50,000 in reward money brings the rustlers to justice.

"We're taking a proactive response to an ongoing problem," he said.