

Take on the Challenge



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As spring winds down, the excitement builds for young graduates as they begin to think about either their next steps for continuing education or the ultimate step of entering the workforce. Over the past few weeks, the American Hereford Association's (AHA) staff has been involved with many different youth leadership conferences. I have had the pleasure of addressing many of these groups about my journey, and I have also shared with them some of the opportunities and challenges of agriculture.

I met some of the brightest and most talented college students from across the country during both the Agriculture Future of America (AFA) and the Youth Beef Industry Congress (YBIC) conferences. The AHA hosted a group of students that attended the AFA conference, and our staff shared some of their experiences.

The National Junior Hereford Association board of directors attended the YBIC conference and joined other junior breed association boards along with juniors from state beef associations from throughout the U.S. Some of our staff was also instrumental in planning that event.

In addition, I was asked to address the freshman and sophomore ag students at Black Hawk East College. During these events, it was exciting to see the engagement and

enthusiasm of the students for agriculture and, more specifically, the beef industry. The discussions and questions ranged from "How did you get to your current job?" to "What are the tools that you think will need to be developed to help improve production and efficiency in the industry?"

Opportunities in agriculture

As I prepared to address these different groups, I was researching different sites in order to share with these groups the importance of agriculture and the opportunities and challenges these individuals will be faced with over the course of their careers. This research was fascinating and reminded me of the great job our industry does feeding a world population.

According to the American Farm Bureau Federation, there are 2.2 million farms that dot America's rural landscape. About 97% of the U.S. farms are operated by families, individuals, family partnerships or family corporations, and farm and ranch families comprise just about 2% of the U.S. population.

In addition, more than 21 million American workers (15% of the total U.S. workforce) produce, process and sell the nation's food and fiber. Also, according to Farm Bureau's statistics, today's farmers produce 262% more food with 2% fewer inputs (labor, seeds, feed,

fertilizer, etc.) compared with 1950's farmers.

More specifically, according to the 2012 United States Department of Agriculture Ag Census, there were approximately 619,172 farms that specialized in beef cattle production, and the average herd size was about 40 head with an average producer age of 58 years. The economic impact is staggering, as there was \$88.25 million in farm gate receipts. In 2015 the value of beef exports equaled \$6.302 billion and the top export markets include Japan, Mexico, Canada, South Korea, Hong Kong and the Middle East.

As I addressed these students, the message was clear. There are plenty of opportunities to stay engaged in agriculture because all of us are challenged to continue to produce a healthy, safe and sustainable product to a growing number of consumers. These challenges will force our industry to endorse technology and be willing to take head-on the questions from consumers about how we produce our product to ensure we are conscious of leaving our God-given resources better for the next generation.

It was exciting to talk with these groups. Their members are engaged, well educated, determined and full of enthusiasm for the industry. I encouraged them to not be afraid to take on a challenge in order to create an opportunity and, really, just to enjoy the journey. **HW**