Tell Consumers Sustainability Exists

by ***Troy Smith***

Sustainability is one of those buzzwords that have become part of the jargon of corporate, academic, governmental and everyday work and social environments. It's a term used frequently by public speakers and writers. Some critics of the beef industry have latched onto it. They claim raising cattle for food is no longer sustainable. Some go so far as to say it never was.

It has reached the point that a good many beef producers are sick and tired of the word. They would prefer not to hear or to speak about sustainability. That would be a mistake in the opinion of Jude Capper. The Montana-based sustainability consultant and Washington State University adjunct professor of animal science is passionate about defending livestock production. She encourages cattle folk to seize every opportunity to talk about what they do — and why it is sustainable.

Jude Capper, livestock sustainability consultant and Washington State University adjunct professor, is shown here addressing the Sandhills Cattle Association convention in Valentine, Neb. Capper encourages beef producers to be proactive in countering inaccurate and downright false information about animal agriculture's environmental impact. Despite the claims of activist groups, says Capper, the beef industry's carbon footprint is relatively small.

"To me, being sustainable means to last or continue for a very long time," says Capper. "We wouldn't be raising cattle in the same places for 100 or 200 years if we weren't sustainable. The beef industry is inherently sustainable."

Of course, that's not the story told by beef industry detractors. Much of it comes from activist groups seeking to reduce or end animal agriculture. Capper says anti-beef activist groups often use outdated and even false information to support their own agendas. They present their views in compelling ways that often resonate with consumers. In the absence of facts, people believe the misinformation. And many of them now spread it even further through social media.

Even factual information is taken out of context. Capper laments the way the beef industry is vilified for using too much water, but little is said about water used to maintain golf courses and immaculate suburban lawns.

Capper spends much of her time speaking to organizations of every persuasion — busting myths and arming livestock producers with tools and messages they can use to respond to uninformed or misinformed consumers. She urges beef producers to be ready to dispute claims that raising cattle is harmful to the environment. It just isn't true.

"Environmental impact must be assessed using science rather than ideological principles and touch-feely thought processes," insists Capper.

What the critics miss is how livestock production has improved, through greater efficiency, and how environmental effects have been reduced. Capper says beef producers should talk about efficiency, because the industry definitely has become more efficient. She notes how in 1977 it took five animals to produce the same amount of beef as four animals produced in 2007. Other efficiencies achieved during that 30-year period include:

- 124 fewer days were needed to raise a market-ready beef animal.
- Beef yield per animal increased by 31%.
- Increased production was achieved with 30% fewer animals utilizing 33% less land.
- 20% less feed was required.
- Water requirements were reduced by 12%.
- Both manure and methane gas production decreased by 18%.
- The beef industry's total carbon footprint was reduced by 16%.

Speaking of the carbon footprint, Capper says even the Environmental Protection Agency's data are favorable, indicating that a total of only 2.1% of all greenhouse gases are attributable to beef production. Capper calls that number "really, really small" compared to other industries that do far less good for the world but leave a far bigger footprint.

The beef industry may have reduced its environmental effect through increased productivity and efficiency, but a great challenge looms large. With the inevitable growth of the world's population, a 70% increase in total meat consumption is expected by the year 2050. Demand for more animal protein must be met by producing more meat on a diminishing amount of arable land. And livestock industries will be pressured to further reduce environmental impact.

Capper believes success will depend on reducing the time it takes for animals to reach market weight by enhancing growth rate through genetics and other technologies. Losses due to disease and parasites must be reduced. Calving and weaning rates must increase, and the carrying capacity of land must increase through innovative grazing management and improved forage varieties. But Capper is optimistic. She believes beef producers can meet the challenge and maintain sustainability.

"Beef producers are strong and adaptable. They also want to pass on their legacy to their kids and grandkids so they can keep doing what they are doing," Capper says.

Their operations will be sustainable, Capper adds, if three components remain intact: economic viability, environmental responsibility and social acceptability. Too often well-meaning people claim that people and the planet must be put ahead of profit. Capper disagrees, insisting profit is every bit as important. Without economic viability, an enterprise is out of business.

"I firmly believe that all three have to balance. If any one is prioritized, the business will not achieve long-term sustainability," says Capper.

"Sustainability does not mean organic, natural or grass-fed. Every beef production system can be sustainable. It means turning sunshine into steak," she adds. "Beef is safe, affordable and nutritious. Every producer should be well enough informed to carry that message to conversations with consumers." **HW**

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