



Continuing the Conversation

During the Hereford Genetic Summit Sept. 4-5, 2014, Hereford breeders were challenged to embrace technology, focus on the customer, and concentrate on feed efficiency and end product merit to help position the breed to gain more commercial market share. We will “continue the conversation” in upcoming *Hereford World* issues as we discuss with breeders key take-home messages from the conference and as an Association we continue to build a roadmap for improving Herefords’ position in the cattle industry. For a complete summary of the event, visit HerefordGeneticSummit.com or see the October *Hereford World*.

This issue:

Sharing the Story

Stewardship Insight

An industry expert shares the proactive approach being taken to address society’s shifting animal agriculture concerns.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Trained as a veterinarian, Gerald Stokka has always been interested in animal care. His career has included seven years in private practice, 12 years on the faculty at Kansas State University and 11 years as a member of the Pfizer Animal Health veterinary operations team working from Cooperstown, N.D. In 2012 he began a new role with North Dakota State University as a “livestock stewardship Extension specialist.”

Stokka explains that his “stewardship” position — and others like it at land-grant universities — is being created to take a proactive approach in assisting livestock producers, primarily beef producers, and the consuming public in understanding one another.

In his role Stokka says his goal is “to help restore trust, respect and communication between agriculture and the consumers of our products.”

He points out, “Due to the current structure of our society, there are very few of us directly involved in utilizing renewable resources — sunshine, moisture, forage and grain — to produce food. As a result the vast majority of our population no longer connect or understand the ‘culture’ that is agriculture.”

Stokka notes the widening disconnection that has intensified between rural and urban people over the past decade.

To address this, Stokka’s efforts have included helping audiences in agriculture to understand what stewardship is all about — and asking them for their help in communicating with consumers. Stokka says, “I cannot do this alone. At every opportunity I challenge, yes even coerce, producers to be willing to take on the challenge of being a spokesperson.”

The audiences he works with are, of course, producers, veterinarians and others involved in agriculture. But additionally, he is aiming to reach the consuming public with messages about production agriculture.

In communicating with consumers, Stokka says he strives to share information from an objective, scientific standpoint when possible, but he also tries to encompass the passion producers have for what they do. “Producing food — agriculture — is a culture that deserves all of our respect. However, we cannot demand respect, in some cases we [agriculture] need to earn it back.”

Defining stewardship

As he carries the message of livestock stewardship to

different audiences, Stokka acknowledges that there are various terms and definitions that encompass animal welfare, animal care, stockmanship and stewardship. He says, “The definition I use and want people to remember is this: Stewardship is the careful and responsible management of things entrusted to one’s care.”

Stokka says that definition is from Webster’s dictionary, and he particularly likes the use of the word “entrusted.”

He continues, “What are those things entrusted to us in agriculture? They are land, livestock, people. We have a philosophical reason to carefully and responsibly manage these resources. If not us, then who? Only those who have a vested interest, and not just materially, will manage these properly.”

Stokka also adds one more item to the list, saying, “We have a responsibility to be stewards of the ‘truth.’ We can no longer sit back and allow untruths and misleading statements about agriculture, food, diets, and the people in our culture to go unchallenged.”

Looking to the future, Stokka says his goal in addressing stewardship issues is to be a responsive, knowledgeable resource for the industry and to help producers lay as much groundwork as possible in educating and earning trust from consumers in order to stay ahead of issues that may harm agriculture. **HW**

The stewardship story

Quality, taste and safety remain at the top-of-mind for consumers today, but for the 80 million Millennial consumers, born between 1980 and 2000, even more is expected of cattlemen and the beef industry.

“Transparency is expected,” explained John Lundeen, National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) senior executive of market research, at the Hereford Genetic Summit on Sept. 5. Lundeen shared with attendees why they need to consider the consumer when making management decisions. “Consumers don’t necessarily want to know a lot, but they want to know a little. They also want to see continuous improvement. With Millennials you’ll hear about social responsibility and sustainability. We have to continue to tell the story about how we are caretakers.”

Lundeen said supermarket chains and restaurants are moving toward adopting a set of animal welfare standards. “We need to get ahead of the curve of what they expect,” he said. “Consumers mistrust science or they find their own science on the Internet. We have to do a better job of telling our story about growth enhancements and why the feedyard exists and put it into terms of benefits and how it gets them quality, consistent, safe and tasty product.” **HW**

