



Telling His Story

Through the Farmers Feed US program, a Minnesota Hereford breeder is telling his story to consumers.

by **Christy Couch Lee**

It's no secret. Consumers want to know how their food is produced. They want to know that the food they're feeding their families is safe, nutritious and wholesome. And, it's up to farmers and cattlemen to build that trust by telling their stories.

One Minnesota Hereford breeder, Bryan Lawrence, Princeton, is doing just that. Through the Farmers Feed US program, he is one of 64 farmers from eight states who is telling his story through a website designed to engage consumers and garner their trust.



Bryan (right) and Doug (left) Lawrence are committed to sharing their story of caring for their livestock with consumers.

Lawrence, a third-generation Hereford breeder, and his wife, Marytina, raise their four children — Montana, 12; Wyatt, 10; Wade, 9; and Wynn, 3 — on their family farm, which consists of 65 registered Hereford cows. Their primary market is local heifer and bull customers.

Last fall, Lawrence participated in this state-specific, national program. Farmers Feed US was developed by the Center for Food Integrity (CFI) — a non-profit organization dedicated to building consumer trust and confidence in today's food system.

Mark Crouser, CFI Farmers Feed US project coordinator, says the program was born because of the growing desire for farmers to tell the story of how they care for their land and their animals.

“There is a growing interest by consumers in how food is produced,” Crouser says. “So the ability for farmers to tell their story to an engaged audience has never been greater.”

Through the Farmers Feed US program, consumers are drawn to the program website through the incentive of winning a year's worth of groceries from their grocer of choice through \$5,000 in gift cards. In order for consumers to register on the site, they must view a video of a farmer in their state giving a virtual tour of his farm. Through this video, the selected farmer exhibits how he or she does, in fact, care about producing safe, affordable and nutritious food.

“Consumers are interested in meeting farmers from their state,” Crouser says. “Through the site, they can learn how laying hens are raised. They learn how cattle are raised. And, in Bryan's case, they learn about the generational connection between his grandfather, father, himself and his wife. He has an interesting and compelling story

to tell. It shows that Bryan is very much like the rest of us, and we're able to present that shared connection to consumers."

The approach of the Farmers Feed US program is different than similar outreach projects, as it appeals to the consumer's sense of shared values, Crouser says.

"For far too long, we've used science when talking with consumers about the way we raise food," he says. "But that's not necessarily something that appeals to consumers. Through Farmers Feed US, farmers talk about their work to produce safe, nutritious and affordable food, all while caring for their livestock and land, as well as families and communities. Those are all values consumers and farmers share."

To date, eight states have participated in the Farmers Feed US program — Ohio, Iowa, Indiana, Missouri, South Dakota, Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin, while Illinois will launch this summer. All eight states have participated in the initial 90-day grocery sweepstakes component, and four states have conducted a second sweepstakes phase after the initial event.

And, Crouser says, several other states are in the initial planning phase of their own programs.

Funding for the program is provided by commodity organizations within each state — from the beef, corn, soybean, swine, poultry and dairy organizations to state Farm Bureau and ag council groups — Crouser says. And, the number and types of organizations vary by state — from more than 30 groups in Michigan to a handful in others.

Featured producers are selected based on recommendations from



Bryan (front, second from right) and his wife, Marytina (front, second from left), along with their family: children, Wade (front, right), Wyatt (front, left), Montana (back, right), and Wynn (front, center); and Bryan's parents, Doug (back, left), and JoAnn (back, center) are all involved in the family Hereford operation.

the participating commodity groups, Crouser says.

"Traditionally, they have some media training and understand what the consumer would like to know," he says.

"Consumers don't want to know about the mechanics of a tractor.

They want to know that farmers are committed to raising safe and affordable food."

Lawrence says he was contacted for participation through the Minnesota Farm Bureau.

"We enjoy promoting agriculture and registered Hereford cattle, so it was a natural fit," he explains. "When the Minnesota Farm Bureau asked us to be involved, there was no question we would."

With this Farmers Feed US program, Lawrence says, his family's involvement grew from the video participation to media interviews and activities.

"When the program first kicked off, we did many radio and local newspaper interviews," he says. "And, I've received quite a bit of feedback on the radio interviews, when neighbors heard the interview as they drove down the road listening to the farm report."

The Lawrence family also represented the program by spending a day at their local grocery store, handing out recipes and information about agriculture to customers.

"Through this, we had a lot of one-on-one interaction with people," he says. "Customers told us which products they preferred, and they were excited to see local farmers talking about our products."

In addition, the family attended a University of Minnesota basketball game with winners of a drawing for free tickets to the game as part of the Farmers Feed US promotion.

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“That was a very rewarding experience,” he says. “We got to sit with the winners, and they were so excited about being chosen.

It was great interaction with the consumer, and agriculture was spotlighted during that game, as well.”

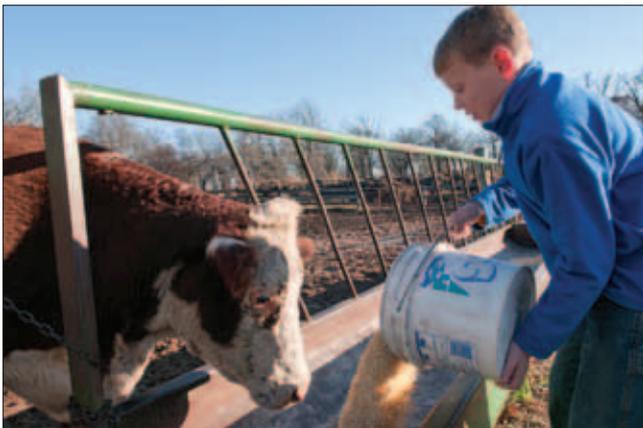
This interactive program approach seems to be working. Crouser says that during the first program launch in Ohio, more than 200,000 consumers registered through the site. And the trend has continued with more than 1 million registrations occurring within the first eight states.

In addition, based on a survey sent to participants at the conclusion of the program, nearly 96 percent of participants believed the farmers presented on the site were the kind of people they desired to be producing their food.

Although the benefits of speaking out for the industry are well known, the idea can seem intimidating to some producers. However, these men say, it's as important now as it's ever been.

Speak your mind

Crouser says cattlemen should consider telling their stories when the opportunity arises.



Wyatt Lawrence takes pride in helping on the family Hereford operation.

“Many farmers have grown up on the farm and have dedicated their lives to raising livestock and crops,” he says. “They show such enthusiasm and passion, and they have an incredible story to tell.”

Plus, he says, it's a producer's obligation to promote agriculture.

“It's our responsibility to feed a growing population, and in the next 40 years, we'll have to produce as much food as we have for the past 8,000 years,” he says. “We have an obligation to this growing population to produce the food we need. In doing so, we must be open and transparent in an effort to gain their trust.”

Lawrence says cattlemen and farmers must tell their stories to these consumers, as the average American today has little connection to agriculture.

“There is a huge disconnect between the consumer and agriculture, in general,” he says. “We really need to talk with them about how food is produced and about how we care for our animals. Consumers want to know about their food. We need to tell them we're producing good, wholesome, quality products.”

To begin telling your story, you must educate yourself, Lawrence says.

“You may be asked many questions by consumers,” he says. “Because we grew up in the Hereford associations, the Farm Bureau and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, we have been able to gather and utilize information.”



Through the Farmers Feed US program, livestock and livestock producers are featured, sharing the story of how safe, nutritious food is produced.

He recommends you begin at the local level — collecting information about consumer concerns and facts about the industry and researching the educational programs available.

“We need to emphasize that we are food producers — for U.S. consumers and the world,” Lawrence says. “The majority of our operations are still family owned, and these families are consuming the products we produce. Farmers Feed US gives us the opportunity to share that story on a local and national level.”

By telling his story, Lawrence is educating consumers about the important job he and his family do each and every day. He's educating consumers about how they are, in fact, feeding their families safe, nutritious and wholesome food, produced by farmers in their communities and within their state. It's truly an important story to tell. **HW**

Editor's Note: To learn more about *Farmers Feed US* or to view Lawrence's virtual tour, visit farmersfeedus.org.