



Critical Consumers, Innovators, Changing Times

Every day that goes by, the consuming public gets more particular about the way we care for our cattle. I recently returned from the 15th World Hereford Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, and spent time visiting with Scandinavians and other Europeans about animal welfare issues.

In the European Union (EU), there is rarely, if ever, a steer made from a bull calf. Horn removal is becoming an expensive surgical exercise, requiring anesthesia from a trained veterinarian. In the winter time, cows must be kept in a barn because of the tough winters and are not allowed to range the way most U.S. cattle are wintered.

The animal welfare standards in Europe make it very difficult for its beef industry to prosper without heavy subsidies. Most of the farms we visited were less than 20 cows; the largest, 140 cows. Barn space often is a limiting factor. The two barns required to house the 140 head were enormous and would cost a small fortune to build here in the states.

After witnessing the demands put on European beef producers, a person can begin to recognize the subtle vein of welfare demands beginning to resonate

here in the U.S. There are several issues driving a potential beef cattle welfare movement here in our backyard.

First, increasing global demands and incentives for high-quality U.S. beef are beginning to pressure beef companies to develop standards necessary to do business in those countries. In Japan there is a growing demand for beef programs that tell a story and are traceable to the farm or ranch origin. Japanese consumers want to know where the product came from, who produced it and what care was used to manage the animals.

In Europe total traceability back to the ranch is required along with non-hormone treated status. The weakening U.S. dollar has made U.S. commodities a very attractive buy for our export partners, but our export partners are not willing to compromise their own standards for handling and management. Therefore, U.S. branded beef companies are beginning to see opportunities to develop beef programs under the required standard that will tell the right story and reap an appropriate premium for proper documentation and compliance.

This gradual movement will ultimately become an accepted standard over time here in the U.S., and we all need to begin to prepare for this change. A market- or premium-driven standard is much more palatable to us as producers, but as they become more the norm, you can bet that legislation will soon be proposed that affix the new marketing standards to law.

U.S. supermarket meat buyers are beginning to ask the same questions. Independent grocery chains, in particular, are looking for an edge to compete with the commodity driven Wal-Mart's of the world that are price drivers.

Tesco, the largest retailer in Europe, is developing its own standards for animal handling, management, care and quality. Tesco has opened a new chain of stores in California called Fresh and Easy. The new grocery concept is developing product demands based on the philosophy of environmental sustainability with a social consciousness toward the welfare of those animals producing meat for its stores.

Never before have we, in the cow-calf sector, been so affected by the

consumer, and consumer influence is only going to increase over time. For many of us, we will have to decide fairly quickly if we are in the cattle business or the beef business. The answer is both; we're producing an expensive, nutritionally dense beef product, and the way we treat our cattle whether we are a seedstock supplier, commercial operator or hobby farmer will soon determine the value we receive in a very demanding global marketplace.

These changing times will soon begin to affect all of us whether we have two head or 2,000 head. Some of our Western heritage and habits are bound to be scrutinized in the years to come. The real battle will be maintaining rational standards for animal welfare that will allow us to prosper so we as an industry won't have to burden the country with subsidies in order to stay alive, which is what has happened in Europe. Keeping rational standards will require that we are all involved in the debate and work hard to keep our lawmakers informed of what a great job we do in raising healthy, wholesome livestock. **HW**