



A collaborative effort toward sustainability is the answer to feeding our growing population.

What Sustainability Means for Cattle Producers

A look into what sustainability really means for the industry from a corporate perspective.

by Kayla M. Wilkins

Most have heard the slogan challenging agriculture producers to feed the growing population estimated to reach 9 billion by 2050. However, when put in a different perspective, this statistic shows 2% of the population is feeding the other 98% and the thought that those population numbers are only climbing, should spark interest in today's primary agriculture producers.

According to Cameron Bruett, head of corporate affairs for JBS USA, at National Cattlemen's Beef Association Cattlemen's College, sustainability industrywide is the answer.

Define sustainability

Bruett explains sustainability is a somewhat new concept and a nebulous term at that. He notes that in the early stages, sustainability was misconstrued by the masses to be directly associated with a vegan lifestyle.

When the term became widely known, Bruett says the narrative then, and still today by some, was a focus on how rapidly

the beef industry was leaving a so-called environmental footprint—prompting consumers to shy away from buying beef products.

He says since the early years, the definition of sustainability, although still not completely clear, has changed to the capacity to endure.

“Do we have the opportunity to do better today than we did yesterday, so we have an opportunity to improve for tomorrow?” he questions. “At its core, it is doing more with less; it's efficiency. Which is a good definition for beef producers because efficiency is the name of the game, efficiency translates into profitability,” he says.

Seeing sustainability in management practices on cattle

operations is not a single-trait change; it is multifaceted.

“Sustainability is about balancing the societal, economical and environmental factors that impact your business,” Bruett says. “Sustainability does in fact mean the profitability of your operation, not just your environmental footprint.”

Although the idea sounds uncomplicated from the outside looking in, there are several perspectives and constituents involved that can prove otherwise.

Perspective and challenges

Bruett references Norman Rockwell's painting “The County Agent.” The painting portrays a farming scene from years ago

with a big red barn, rolling hills, free-range chickens and one calf intermingled with cats and dogs in the forefront. Bruett explains the painting shows the nostalgic view consumers have of agriculture. He says the modern-day consumer is still equating agriculture with this dated idea.

“These ideological notions of 1930s-1940s, pre-World War II agriculture is what we market to consumers,” he explains. “We don't talk about the modern agriculture production system.”

Bruett says it is programs like the Good Food Movement sweeping the nation and engaging customers daily illustrating the idea small-scale farming can feed the world. He explains the program spurs a conversation about conventional farming versus organic or natural farming, and according to Bruett, the conversation should cease because in order to achieve maximum efficiency, we need to utilize all pieces of American agriculture available.

“Of course, modern agriculture production allows us to create

“Sustainability is about balancing the societal, economical and environmental factors that impact your business.”

— Cameron Bruett

a safe, very affordable product in an efficient manner that benefits great swaths of society,” he explains. “Whereas local agriculture, while it certainly produces opportunities for small and local farmers, and I am all for that, does not present itself as an option to be scaled up to meet some of the great challenges.”

Bruett says the media isn’t aiding in the process. He explains they are equating sustainability to a process and avoiding addressing the overarching goal of producing enough food safely and efficiently to viably feed the masses.

“Equating a process to sustainability has nothing to do with it, it is about the outcome,” he explains. “It’s about contributing to better environmental, social and economic results — it is not about a process.”

Bruett says the media using agriculture in a negative connotation is resulting in negative consumer perceptions toward all sectors of the supply chain.

With more than 7 billion consumers to increase to 9 billion by 2050 with an increase in the middle class and an increase in demand for protein, Bruett says everyone in the supply chain from producer to retailer must coordinate. He explains that in today’s society, the wealthy consumers, although a small number, are loud and driving the demand for solely organic food production.

He says the corporate challenge lies in balancing the demands of the modern consumer with the needs of the agriculture producer to utilize technology. Bruett stresses the importance of collaboration.

“The diversity of the American food system is our greatest strength and we need to embrace that,” he says.

The solution

Bruett claims the best way to achieve sustainability is to go back to the core values upon which sustainability was based.

“Responsibly meeting the needs of the present while improving the ability of future generations to responsibly meet their own needs based upon the challenges they are going to face tomorrow,” he says.

In order to truly embrace American agriculture and to practice sustainable agriculture as a whole, Bruett says the industry needs to address these issues in a more effective manner.

He notes 95% of Americans don’t care about the issues of antibiotics or GMOs, but the minority is loud. He says that minority is tearing the industry apart, and it is time producers do something about that problem.

“We have been silent,” he says. “We have not taken these issues on in a meaningful manner. We do it at forums like this. We talk to our neighbors about it, but we haven’t engaged in a true



It is important producers join the effort in bridging the gap between consumers and agriculture.

advocacy campaign to talk about the benefits of our agriculture production system to demonstrate what we are actually doing and the progress that we are making and to combat some of the things that are out there.”

Bruett says the modern consumer, who is removed from agriculture, is eager to be involved in the food production process and transparency is the best avenue to achieve consumer trust.

“What it really comes down to is transparency,” Bruett explains. “The consumer wants to be more involved in what we do. They want to understand not only what we do, but why we do

the things we do and how that aligns with their values.”

Bruett stresses the importance of the issue of sustainability. He says the issue will only continue to grow and to push agriculture back from a technological standpoint unless all facets of the supply chain take a stand quickly.

“By 2050, we are going to have almost 10 billion people on the planet Earth,” he notes. “Global income is increasing, global population is increasing and consumption of the products that we produce is going to increase, as well. We have to figure out how we do more with less.” **HW**



Engaging consumers in all aspects of the supply chain from feedlot to their plate is essential.