

Good News for Beef

As today's consumers want protein in their diets, the Beef Checkoff is giving them reason to choose beef.

by Julie White

Remember when eating nutritiously meant finishing those veggies on your plate? Or choosing a healthy option at the grocery store meant you sacrificed on taste, and your family probably will put up a fight when you try to serve it at dinner.

John Lundeen, senior executive director of market research for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), remembers some of his first nutrition research conducted 20-plus years ago. He and other researchers talked to focus groups about good-tasting food that was nutritious, and the consumers wouldn't "buy" it.

In September, the Beef Checkoff invited media to Denver to share how nutrition research is proving beef has a place on the healthful plate — and things have changed.

"Now the consumer wants it all," Lundeen says. "They say 'I want taste, I want nutrition and I want it in the same food.' This is the biggest thing I've seen changed."

He notes that this type of food has been delivered to the marketplace to meet the basic change in consumer expectations — consumers don't want to give up taste and nutrition. These consumers he spoke of are the Millennials (consumers ages 15 to 36), who are now 80 million strong.

As health is gaining emphasis in food decisions, Lundeen says there is concern for the beef industry. "We ask consumers if they are eating more beef, less beef or about the same. When consumers who say they are eating less beef, it's because of nutrition."

Lundeen says eating less red meat has been the dialogue for a long time in the U.S. "Beef has a dark cloud," he describes. "Chicken has a nutritional halo."

Another shift in eating habits in the last five years, he says, is that a majority of consumers say they are trying to get



more protein in their diets and protein listed on a label is important to them.

Beef's role

NCBA executive director of nutrition research Shalene McNeill who is a registered dietician and nutrition scientist, says their goal is to establish beef for health, or re-establish beef for health, in nutrition by investing checkoff dollars in nutrition research.

"We still have a scientific community that can be open minded, but it's also important to point out that we have a lot of nutrition research going on and a nutrition research environment that is very much active in the area of benefits of a plant-based diet," McNeill says.

"While there is good news about beef's role in a healthy diet, there is a lot of research on the role a plant-based diet plays in health."

That's the reason, she says, for the Beef Checkoff to continue to demonstrate and establish the role beef plays in food for health. "We want to help people build better diets with beef," she says. "Consumers want taste and nutrition in the same packet. We know beef is one of the best-tasting nutritious foods out there, and we are committed to helping people enjoy beef as part of a healthy and balanced diet."

Since the 1920s, farmers and ranchers have funded hundreds of studies to help understand the role of beef in human nutrition. In 1984 "The Statement of

Principles Regarding Nutrition and Health" (see beefnutrition.org) was adopted by the beef industry. It lays out the industry's commitment to using science as a foundation for nutrition research.

Over the years research programs have evolved as questions changed according to the science of the time. "In the 1920-50s, we were still discovering vitamins and minerals," McNeill says. "Meat was viewed as a nourishing food because it delivered iron, protein and zinc — these nutrients we knew people needed to grow and thrive."

In the 1940s the grain supply was enriched with iron, thiamin, riboflavin and niacin. "These are nutrients found in meat and we were rationing for the war," she says. "Everything was very much focused on getting enough nutrition."

McNeill says, as research evolved, scientists started to take on bigger nutrition-research questions like, "Why are so many men dying of heart disease?" and tackled ways to prevent chronic diseases. "That kind of nutrition research began to change the way we view beef's role in health," she says.

"We're in a good position from a market position to understand that the public is favorable and open minded, and they like the way beef tastes. They see the value beef plays nutritionally, but there will be more research over the coming years that can get that out of balance."

McNeill says that throughout the evolution of nutrition research, beef's best nutritional proposition has continued to be its nutrient density. "Beef has high-quality protein, which means it includes all essential amino acids in the right proportions that the body needs to most optimally use them and it also has the key nutrients. It's a lot more than just protein and iron. We want to understand this better." **HW**

Editor's note: To learn more about Beef Checkoff funded nutrition research, visit BeefNutrition.org.