



# Better with Beef



**Colorado's livestock proponents take a stand against anti-agriculture legislation.**

by *Rachel Gabel*

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Three weeks after Colorado Gov. Jared Polis called agriculture the “cornerstone to the foundation of our state” in an open letter aimed at preserving the National Western Stock Show’s (NWSS) future in Colorado, he signed a proclamation promoting “MeatOut Day” on March 20 and the removal of animal products from Coloradans’ diets.

This slight aimed at the state’s \$4.6 billion animal protein industry isn’t the first from the governor and comes in the midst of the introduction of multiple pieces of legislation that are potentially damaging to agriculture.

For the past few years, legislation against animal agriculture has prompted the agriculture community to take a stand.

## **Meat of the issue**

The road to Colorado’s MeatIn Day began in 2019 with the start of what some have called the governor’s ongoing war on rural Colorado.

When Polis attended a Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA) staff meeting on Aug. 9, 2019, he purchased 250 Impossible Whoppers, a plant-based protein version of Burger King’s Whopper burger, for the staff. Polis reportedly asked them to capitalize on the plant-based protein trend by looking beyond the number one agriculture commodity in the state, cattle.

The day prior, Polis shared a Facebook post touting the Impossible Whopper, saying he couldn’t differentiate the taste from beef. “I’ll always do my best to ensure Colorado’s farmers and ranchers are positioned to benefit from new technology and new markets,” Polis posted.

The governor’s comments came just days after a fire closed a Kansas Tyson beef plant and sent the cattle market reeling from a processing glut.

Though no specific directive was given to the CDA, Sen. Jerry Sonnenberg (R-Sterling), who is a farmer and rancher, says Colorado’s governor is painting his state’s second-largest economic driver in a negative light.

COURTESY OF STERLING LIVESTOCK COMMISSION



Sen. Jerry Sonnenberg (R-Sterling) spoke to a crowd at Sterling Livestock Commission, encouraging people to defend the livestock industry.

While the industry was steeped in uncertainty following the Tyson fire, Polis sat down with Joey Bunch, a Denver political writer, over an Impossible Whopper and told Bunch adapting to the market is critical, saying between bites, "Today's Walmart is tomorrow's Sears."

That dust up was followed by Polis' appearance to the Colorado State Fair, where he was booed by rodeo audiences. In an interview with *The Fence Post Magazine*, he was quoted saying specialty agriculture can offer producers greater margins. He offered an example of a water buffalo dairy known for their artisan mozzarella cheese.

The Colorado Cattlemen's Association (CCA) was quick to respond to Polis' comments to the CDA, organizing an event at the NWSS grounds in Denver to kick off the group's "Better with Beef" campaign. Members around the state displayed banners emblazoned with important facts about the effects of

ranching and cattle on the state, from positive environmental impacts to nutrition.

This campaign gained steam as anti-agriculture legislation was drafted and heard regarding multiple sectors of agriculture.

### Ballots against beef

Ballot Proposition 114 narrowly passed. The proposition forcibly introduced the gray wolf on public lands west of the Continental Divide by



COURTESY OF THE LINCOLN COUNTY CATTLEMEN'S ASSOCIATION

Members of the Lincoln County Cattlemen's Association are sleeved up and ready to serve lunch to those who attended the event in the eastern Plains town of Hugo.

December 2023. After the passage, Gov. Polis urged the Colorado Wildlife Commission to get wolves on the ground by the middle of 2022.

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COURTESY OF STERLING LIVESTOCK COMMISSION

The MeatIn event at Sterling Livestock Commission was well attended. An auction raised over \$100,000 for a local charity that purchases Christmas gifts for children in need.

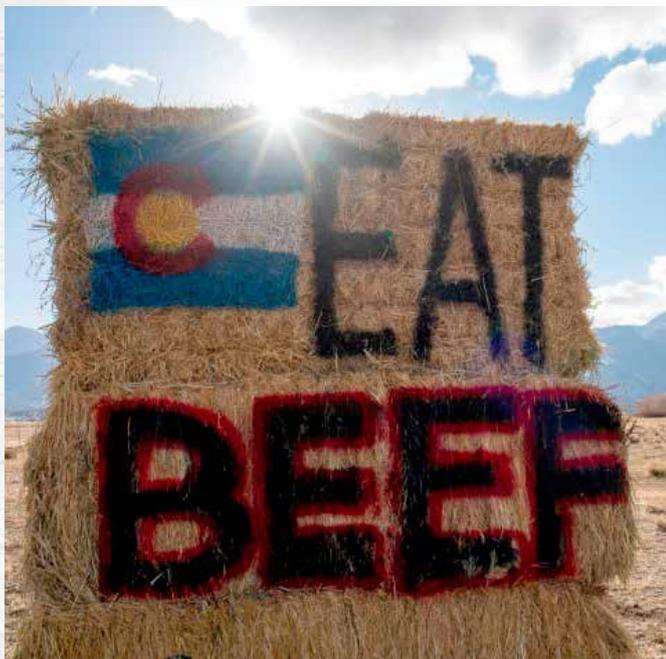


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Just prior to the arrival of the pandemic, the war on rural Colorado heated up when First Gentleman Marlon Reis, an avowed vegan and animal rights activist, supported and testified on behalf of two failed bills — the Humane Pet Act, HB20-1084, and Prohibit Exotic Animals in Traveling Performances, SB20-125.

In July 2020, Polis' appointee to the Colorado Board of Veterinary Medicine, Ellen Kessler, posted her support of HB 20-1343 Egg-laying Hen Confinement Standards, calling the legislation a baby step, "to get to the true goal of animal lovers, and that is to not keep chickens for eggs nor food."

The egg bill, written in partnership with the Humane Society of the United States, passed and



signed into law. The bill requires all eggs sold in the state to come from a cage-free environment.

Terry Fankhauser, executive vice president of the CCA, expressed concerns over Kessler's clear opposition to animal agriculture. "The question is not about her dietary choices...The question is whether she will be able to serve with the level of responsibility necessary and in an objective way, or will her personal feelings, personal beliefs, and objections get in the way of that," he said.

The 2021 legislative session has seen the reintroduction of Prohibit Exotic Animals in Traveling Performances and a version of the Humane Pet Act, both of which are in committee. Then came Polis' proclamation promoting Meat Out Day.

Days after the proclamation, proposed ballot initiative 2021-2022 #16, known as the PAUSE Act, was reviewed by the title board and a title was set. The title as designated and fixed by the Board is as follows:

A change to the Colorado Revised Statutes concerning expanding prohibitions against



Staff members of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association attended multiple events during MeatIn Day.

cruelty to animals, and, in connection therewith, expanding the definition of "livestock" to include fish; expanding the definition of "sexual act with an animal" to include intrusion or penetration into an animal's anus or genitals with an object or part of a person's body and allowing an exception only for care to improve the animal's health and eliminating the existing exception for animal husbandry practices; defining the "natural lifespan" for certain species of livestock and providing that slaughtering those animals is not animal cruelty if done according to acceptable animal husbandry practices after the animal has lived 1/4 of the natural lifespan; removing several exceptions to the animal cruelty statutes, including exceptions for animal husbandry; and providing that, in case of a conflict, the cruelty to animals statutes supersede statutes concerning animal care.

Proponents of the initiative define "natural lifespans" as 20 years for cattle, eight years for chickens, 10 years for turkeys, six years for ducks, 15 years for pigs, 15 years for sheep and six years for rabbits.

With fast and furious attacks on agriculture seemingly coming from all directions, agriculture banded together to stand in the gap for animal agriculture and the consumers who depend upon it.

### Meat in

Prompted to action, agriculture groups across the state organized and hosted “MeatIn Day” events to support the industry and give back to consumers. More than 35 cities and counties signed proclamations promoting Colorado agriculture, declaring March 20 “Cattlemen’s Day,” “MeatIn Day,” or other similar designations.

Though some criticized the rebuttal to the state’s MeatOut Day as overreaction, Sonnenberg says it simply roused a sleeping giant, adding insult to injury to the state’s livestock industry.

Meat was on the menu and tables across the state. Not counting restaurant and retailer specials, 75 events offered 25,000 people with complimentary barbecue meals, including 1,200 food insecure Denver residents.

Fankhauser says the day’s events across the state were simply amazing, transcending beyond rural communities to unite and serve consumers statewide and to support those in need in urban areas.

More than \$300,000 was raised for local charities, Beef Sticks for Back Packs, various FFA chapters and food banks. Nebraska, Wyoming and Montana governors recognized their protein industries as valuable. Wyoming Gov. Mark Gordon even invited Coloradans across the border to their tables.

Colorado agriculture felt the effects of COVID-19 with the temporary closure of the state’s JBS USA beef packing plant and the million-head backlog the feeders and processors faced. Paired with the PAUSE ballot proposal, the

attack on Colorado agriculture could seep over its borders, especially in terms of lost processing capacity that would be devastated with a passage of PAUSE.

Fankhauser points out Colorado is a gateway state to the nation when it comes to activist attacks on agriculture.

“This is a game of incrementalism and stopping these attacks in the beginning is, without a doubt, the most feasible and least harmful strategy,” he says. “If our industry acts as a united force, we are unstoppable and a measure like Colorado’s initiative 16 and its tentacles will be quickly and unceremoniously stricken from our future.”

Polis downplayed the MeatOut Day proclamation, saying he signs hundreds annually. As for the success of MeatIn Day, the governor took partial credit, suggesting through a spokesperson that he “is thrilled he has helped start a grassroots movement of support for cattlemen and the beef industry.” His office released a statement opposing PAUSE, saying it would hurt Colorado.

Plans for MeatIn 2022 are alive and well, but the legislative challenges facing the industry are a steep hill to climb prior to a second event. Colorado Farm Bureau’s Shawn Martini is urging agriculture stakeholders in Colorado and other states to join forces with the Coloradans for Animal Care, comprised of the state’s major agriculture organizations.

“A lot can change between now and 2022,” Martini says. “But the best thing folks can do is to talk to their friends and neighbors about this initiative and join one of Colorado’s agriculture organizations. Membership matters in this fight and supporting the organizations that support farmers and ranchers is step one.” **HW**

