Collaborating to Improve the Beef Industry’s Sustainability

The U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef helps stakeholders from throughout the supply chain define, measure and discuss the industry’s environmental impact.

By Macey Mueller

Environmental stewardship is a critical component of the beef production system. This is the second in a series of four articles that will highlight the conversations, the practices and the outcomes related to ensuring a long-term food supply and a positive environmental impact.

For years, the term “sustainable” has been widely used, yet vaguely defined throughout the beef industry. That’s not to say that many ranchers, feedlots and other sectors of the supply chain haven’t been actively utilizing sustainable practices, they just haven’t always had the means to describe and validate their efforts with consumers and activists.

Since 2015, a group representing all sectors of the beef value chain has been working to advance economically viable, socially sustainable and environmentally sound beef production. The U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB) is a multi-stakeholder effort that currently includes 133 members representing cow-calf producers, stockers, auction markets, feedyards, processors, retail, food service, allied industry, academia and non-governmental organizations.

Sara Place, Elanco Animal Health chief sustainability officer, has been involved with USRSB since its inception. She says the organization’s first mission was to whittle through the countless ways to measure and track sustainability to develop six high-priority indicators they feel best embody the industry’s environmental impact, social responsibility and financial profitability, including:

- Animal Health and Well-Being
- Efficiency and Yield
- Water Resources
- Land Resources
- Air and Greenhouse Gas Emissions
- Employee Safety and Well-Being

Measuring sustainability

To help each sector better understand and drive improvement in sustainability across the entire industry, USRSB members then developed a set of metrics to assess progress within each of the indicators.

These metrics are measurable, implementable and understandable regardless of the scale of the operation and can help inform decisions that could ultimately move the needle on the key environmental, social and economic factors involved in sustainability. Place says the USRSB’s unique structure allows each sector of the beef supply chain to develop its own metrics for each of the indicators.

The six high-priority indicators and their respective metrics were eventually combined into Sustainability Assessment Guides (SAGs) for each industry sector and are available on USRSB’s website, usrsb.org. They include site-level assessment tools, decision support systems, resources and materials that allow individuals to consider their own operations and identify opportunities for improvement as they relate to the key indicators.

“Through the work of the roundtable, we are able to say here’s how we’re defining sustainable beef using these most important things — the indicators, these are the things we’re going to measure — the metrics, and here’s all of the actual detailed information and resources you can use to do that — the SAGs,” Place says. “Altogether, we call this the ‘framework,’ and it’s really meant as a roadmap to help all sectors of the beef industry navigate improvements in sustainability.”

USRSB also offers online sustainability modules and supporting toolkits for each sector to advance, support and communicate continuous improvement of sustainability across the U.S. beef value chain. Place says the modules are designed to bring the framework to life for the user and create a more guided way to go through the training.

“We know the U.S. beef supply chain is incredibly complex; the issues processors or retailers are dealing with are very different than the day-to-day pressures of a cow-calf producer or livestock auction market,” she says. “The beauty of the modules is that they are customized to the sector, and those specific materials and resources that have been developed really give a good foundation of understanding of how to move forward.”

Armed with high-priority indicators, metrics and valuable educational information ready to disseminate, the USRSB is now focused on developing U.S. beef value chain sustainability goals and collaborating with value chain stakeholders to develop sector-specific targets to support those goals. Place says the goals will be announced at the end of April 2022.

“We’ve been working through the pandemic to set goals and targets for those indicators and metrics and basically use that as our North Star of what to work towards in terms of voluntary adoption of the framework,” Place says. “The roundtable is unique because it spans...
the entire beef value chain, so you’ll see some similarities with our goals and those made by other industry organizations, but they’ll also be different because they are truly about a whole supply chain approach and trying to elevate and improve everything from efficiency and reducing food waste at restaurants and retail all the way to improvements on the ground for cow-calf production.”

“We can’t just ignore these sustainability conversations — we tried that for a long time; if we don’t respond and get the truth out there to prove that what we’re doing is right and that we are committed to continuous improvement, then misinformation is going to dominate the conversation,” she says. “It would be tragic if we were limited by decisions that were made when we weren’t at the table.”

Recognizing sustainability
Through her involvement with USRSB, Lyons-Blythe learned early on that many of the practices farmers and ranchers use are already considered sustainable. Focusing on being more efficient, implementing conservation practices, leveraging data to make selection and management decisions and being more productive with limited resources are all foundational to sustainability, and she says these are steps most producers naturally implement every day.

For example, the cow-calf SAG asks producers if they have a formal, written grazing management plan that includes rotational practices, fencing needs, stocking rates and provisions for natural disasters. Lyons-Blythe says that while activists were initially driving the sustainability conversation — influencing retailers and their stakeholders to make decisions — consumers are now much more aware — and concerned — about how beef is produced and its potential impact on the environment.

“It is essential that cattle producers and the beef value chain get involved in the conversation to share their stories of sustainability,” she says. “I’ve got five kids who want to take over the ranch someday, and if there’s going to be an opportunity here for them one day, I think it’s important that the industry takes action to ensure a sustainable future for the business.”

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