

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

U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef HIGH-PRIORITY INDICATORS



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."



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America’s approach

While the USRSB is focused on creating a framework and setting goals specific to the U.S. beef supply chain, it is also an affiliate of the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (GRSB). However, Place says each roundtable in the world is structured differently and has taken on a different strategy.

“For example, Canada has taken a different approach and has gotten into certification and verification; the USRSB does not do that,” she says. “The USRSB has been focused on building the tools and serving more as a forum and educational group to set out those priorities for sustainable beef.”

Debbie Lyons-Blythe represents Blythe Family Farms as a founding member of USRSB and has been elected to serve as the organization’s chair in 2022. She says the practice-based and voluntary approach is key in acquiring buy-in from all sectors across the industry.

“One of the very first things we decided when setting up the roundtable was that we are not going to be a certification body and start saying that certain companies or ranches are sustainable and others are not,” she says. “The information we are putting together about sustainability is to ensure the entire American beef industry is sustainable. That’s our goal.

“Roundtable members don’t want anybody to think that we are the experts. We definitely have those people out there — researchers in Extension, universities and allied industry — who provide a lot of great information for us to utilize, and we are just trying to be a source to find that information.”

The White City, Kan., rancher says prior to her involvement with USRSB, she had participated in other conversations concerning sustainability goals that she felt were much more prescriptive and weren’t necessarily the best approach for the industry.

“I’ve been involved with retail working groups who wanted producers to do this, this and this and if we could check off enough boxes, we were considered sustainable and they would buy our cattle,” she says. “I told them that was not going to work because you can’t even compare agriculture and the way cattle are raised from eastern Kansas to western Kansas, let alone Montana to Georgia. Everything is just so different within the various geographic areas.”

Lyons-Blythe says the experience with the retail group was an eye-opener, and she realized the topic of sustainability was not going away. She was encouraged that USRSB involved all sectors of the beef value chain and that not all sustainability measurements would be solely based on practices at the farm or ranch level.

“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.”

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.

“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 many farmers and ranchers have a system but have not taken the steps to formalize a plan.

“The more detailed your plan is, the better job you can do with your grass, and ultimately, sequestering carbon is all about maintaining grass,” she says. “I want other farmers and ranchers to know that to make our operations more sustainable, it’s not really about doing a whole lot of things differently, it’s just about doing a few things better.

“The definition of sustainability in my conversations is to take care of the land, take care of the animals, take care of the people and make money, and it takes all four of those things to truly be a sustainable operation at any sector level.”



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Lyons-Blythe says using the USRSB framework, members have a shared goal to improve sustainable practices across the value chain and to increase beef consumption.

“Having that common thread allows us to really work together, to listen to each other and to learn from one another,” she says. **HW**