

Shifting ⇌ Attitudes

Honest collaboration is key to sustainability for producers and consumers.

by **Wes Ishmael**

Consumers today want to know more about their food than ever before, such as where it comes from and how its production impacts the world and society. At the same time, consumers know less than they ever have about agricultural production — both the how and the why.

That goes a long way in explaining producers' frustration and consternation with a world demanding they be more accountable to sustainability when producers have long been committed to caring for livestock and the natural resources that support them. Often, it has felt like the world telling producers what they should do rather than asking what could be done and working with them to find mutually beneficial solutions. But there is a growing sense of movement toward the latter.

"Things are not just bad and getting worse; they're good and getting better," explained Jack Bobo, director of global food and water policy for The Nature Conservancy, as he shared the challenges and opportunities associated with the sustainability journey at last summer's general assembly of the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB). The Nature Conservancy is a USRSB member (more later).

Beyond toddler stage

Although some still view the cattle and beef sustainability conversation as relatively new, it has been almost a decade since the Beef Checkoff Program funded the pioneering cattle life-cycle assessment that benchmarked the U.S. beef production's environmental contribution. It is the foundation of the *Beef Industry Sustainability Assessment*, which addresses the three pillars of sustainability: social responsibility, economic viability and environmental stewardship.

About a decade before that, the United Nations' scientifically flawed *Livestock's Long Shadow* was released, placing livestock production, especially the cattle industry, firmly in the crosshairs of global consumers.

Even the *Paris Climate Agreement* (PCA), an international framework to address global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions is already nearly 8 years old.

"The main aim of the Paris Agreement is to keep the global average temperature rise this century as close as possible to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels," according to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. "... To limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, greenhouse gas emissions must peak before 2025 at the latest and decline 43% by 2030."

However, newness can be used to describe the urgency of the domestic sustainability movement that arrived when the United States rejoined the PCA in 2021, committing to herculean reductions in GHG emissions. The National Climate Task Force hopes to reduce emissions to 50-52% below 2005 levels in 2030 and achieve a net zero (see sidebar) emissions economy by 2050, according to their published goals.

Many public companies — some heavily reliant on agricultural supply chains — joined the fray and began announcing audacious sustainability goals toward carbon neutrality, net zero and the like.

Never mind there are no unified, standardized metrics to benchmark and measure carbon footprints within and across disparate industries, let alone the infrastructure to share necessary data.

Now, those who made the initial commitments are realizing the scope and complexity of making good on their promises and the aggressive deadlines they imposed. This realization appears

to be even more jarring for those reliant on agricultural supply chains because quantifying their carbon footprint depends on producers providing data. So far, both the incentive for producers to provide data and clarity surrounding the need have fallen short.

"If you don't include the producer, the grower, the farmer and rancher in deciding what we're going to measure, you're not going to get anywhere. For me, that's the foundation of collaboration," explained Debbie

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Lyons-Blythe, who was a panelist at the recent Sustainable Agriculture Summit (SAS). She is a Kansas rancher and past chair of the USRSB.

“For me, it’s vital that the grower, the producer, the farmer and the rancher are involved from the beginning. I’ve been involved in the sustainability conversation for a long time, but it was very top-down. There were lots of companies saying, ‘We need you to do these things.’ And I said, ‘Let me see why I would do those things,’” Lyons-Blythe said. She also emphasized the necessity of producers being involved in organizations like USRSB to truly understand the landscape.

“I live in a little tiny community. We don’t have a stoplight. So, if I don’t get off the ranch, then I’m not going to get to connect with packers, processors and retailers,” Lyons-Blythe explained. “I need the opportunity to really connect and learn from them. I have learned that it’s not the consumer who is pressuring these retailers to make all these sustainability changes; it’s their stakeholders, activists and environmental groups ...

“I have to be aware of the pressures. I had no idea that retailers faced the pressures that they do. Now, I’m able to communicate that back to other producers and say, ‘They’re not doing this because they’re excited about what I’m doing on my ranch, specifically; they’re under pressure by investors and other groups and are searching for solutions. We’re being asked to make changes and find solutions, but so are they. So, we can now collaborate around that, and we can now get involved with each other and support each other and come up with strategies to do a good job because it is the right thing to do.’”

Recognition of shared risk and the need to collaborate with producers was a refreshing and heartening hallmark of the SAS. The sold-out meeting of more than 900 included all sectors of agriculture, producers and producer groups, processors and distributors, lending institutions, technology providers, governmental agencies and venture capitalists.

Throughout the presentations and hallway chat, beyond the need to collaborate with producers, much discussion revolved around the how.

Progress in the making

None of what you’ve read so far is to suggest little effort has occurred since commitments were made to address the lack of standardization and infrastructure mentioned earlier or to figure out how to fulfil specific commitments. The opposite is true. There’s no telling the billions of dollars being spent on the endeavor.

For instance, USDA is investing more than \$3 billion in more than 100 projects through Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities (usda.gov/climate-solutions/climate-smart-commodities).

In fact, there are so many current projects (USDA and otherwise), and producer entry points, that Truth in Food developed the Climate Smart Navigator (climatesmart.agweb.com). You simply input what state you’re from, your production sector and what type of climate smart programs you’d like to explore. The result is a list of applicable climate-smart programs with links to more detail.

In some cases, participation requires producers do nothing new because they’re already doing it; they just need to document what they’re doing.

Closer to home, the USRSB developed an array of training modules that help producers identify sustainability opportunities and make further improvement, such as the Grazing Management Plan Development Module (learning.usrsb.org/#grazing-mgmt-plan). There’s also an anonymous self-assessment tool producers can use to evaluate their own operations against the sustainability indicators that USRSB has identified (USRSB.org/resources).

Sustainability Parlance

“Carbon neutral — which refers to having a net-zero carbon footprint — is about reaching a balance between the emission of carbon into the atmosphere and the removal of the climate pollutant through carbon sinks or other offsets,” according to the University of California-Davis, *How Carbon Neutral is Different than Climate Neutral*. “In many instances, being carbon neutral will limit contributions to climate change. Becoming carbon neutral doesn’t encompass all greenhouse gases (GHG) — though it does include carbon dioxide, which makes up about 80% of the planet’s GHG — and some sectors don’t need to be carbon neutral to limit contributions to warming.”

Net zero is another common goal. “Put simply, net zero means cutting greenhouse gas emissions to as close to zero as possible, with any remaining emissions re-absorbed from the atmosphere, by oceans and forests for instance,” according to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. **BA**

Briefly, the USRSB is comprised of five constituencies: producers, allied industries, packers/processors, retailers/foodservice and civil society, which includes academic institutions and non-government organizations. Its 140 members include individual producers and producer organization such as the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, Livestock Marketing Association and American Hereford Association. McDonald’s and Walmart are members, too.

The USRSB’s mission is to: “Advance, support and communicate continuous improvement of sustainability across the U.S. beef value chain.” The USRSB set goals and sector-level targets for six high-priority indicators: air and GHG emissions, land resources, water resources, employee safety and well-being, animal health and well-being, and efficiency and yield.

These are just a few examples of the widespread sustainability activity taking place.

The stakes are the future

Lyons-Blythe believes too many producers get hung up on the information and misinformation surrounding climate change, debating whether or not mankind has any influence.

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“It doesn’t really matter what you believe about climate change. The conversation around climate change is enough to pressure the farmers and ranchers of the world. The only way we can continue to farm and ranch in America is by showing that we are working towards sustainability and are focused on doing the right thing already.” Lyons-Blythe says. “We can be a partner for the solution, instead of the problem. We have to speak up and communicate



The American Hereford Association is working with AgNext and Colorado State University to identify genetic relationships associated with cattle greenhouse gas emissions. These units at Olsen Ranches, Harrisburg, Neb., collect individual animal methane emissions.

to legislators and regulators that American agriculture is already working hard to improve sustainability. We in American agriculture have the facts on our side. We just need to make a few tweaks and be willing to communicate what we are doing.”

Forget for a moment about economic sustainability, social license and all of the other reasons producers need to be involved in the sustainability conversation. Hard as it is, try to wrap your brain around feeding the world.

Jack Bobo did. It is the essence of what he shared with USRSB participants. In broad strokes, it starts with this often-stated fact — the global population of about 7.9 billion today will grow to about 10 billion people by 2050.

“We need 50 to 60% more food in order to feed those people because it’s not just more people, but incomes are rising. So, demand for food is increasing even faster than population,” Bobo explained. “And, of course, we have 800 million people who will go to bed hungry today. It’s really hard for most people to wrap their minds around that. About 9 million people die of hunger related illnesses every year;

25,000 people will die today of hunger ... It’s one person every four seconds, mostly children.”

At the same time, agricultural production efficiency has increased dramatically over time, especially here in the United States. For instance, Bobo pointed out that compared to 1980, U.S. producers in 2011 were producing a bushel of wheat with 40% less land, 35% fewer GHG emissions, 40% less energy, 50% less water and 60% less land erosion.

Yet, when many consumers think about sustainability, Bobo said they think in terms of using less land, water, fertilizer and other inputs.

“That probably means you’ll have a lighter impact on that piece of land. The problem is that if you don’t use inputs, you won’t get as much output, so somebody else will have to pick up the slack ... You reduce inputs and you have a lower local impact, but there’s a bigger global impact somewhere else. The benefits are local, the impacts are global,” Bobo explained.

What we seldom hear is this.

“Population growth after 2050 slows dramatically ... The number of children born this year is probably the same or higher than will be born next year and higher than will be born the next year or the year after that,” Bobo explained. “A hundred percent of population growth is because of people living longer. It’s not because we’re having more children.”

He challenged participants to consider this reality relative to food production.

“Imagine for a moment that we can continue the improvements in productivity, not just to 2050 but beyond. If we do that, we have this huge opportunity because for the first time in human history, we won’t need dramatically more food; we’ll need better food,” Bobo said. “... The next 30 years are not just the most important 30 years there have ever been in the history of agriculture, they’re the most important 30 years there will ever be in the history of agriculture. That’s why we need to get it right. That’s why the work you’re doing is so critically important for the future.”

“If we get to 2050 without cutting down our forests and without draining our rivers, our lakes and our aquifers, we are good forever. There’s no guarantee that we do it. But if we do it, we will have solved this problem. Often, when you hear from conservation groups, it’s sort of all doom and gloom. Things

are bad and they’re going to get worse, and they’re definitely going to get worse further out. But if we get to 2050 and we’ve solved this problem, we have solved this problem.” **BA**

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