

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

If beef producers were to give advice to industry officials, what might they say?

January is meeting month for agricultural producers: producer group meetings, general farm organization meetings, and all the dealer meetings. At most of these meetings, industry officials and other experts offer advice to producers on ways to increase profitability through improved production practices and more attention to marketing.

Independent livestock producers are reminded that marketing begins with decisions about which heifers or gilts to retain for breeding and which bulls or boars are purchased. Providing what the consumer wants is paramount, and all decisions should take that into account.

Livestock producers are also encouraged to develop relationships with their buyers or brokers long before their livestock are ready to sell. Such reminding and advice are aimed squarely at the grass-roots, individual-producer level.

Industry experts also communicate directly with consumers via public relations campaigns, lobbying, advertising, and news releases, depending on the type of organization. They do these activities as representatives of one or more of the various segments of the livestock industry, including livestock ranchers and farmers, slaughter or packing houses, processors, wholesalers, and retailers.

Having attended a number of the meetings in which producers were on the receiving end, we wondered what it would be like if the tables were turned. What if farmers were the ones offering advice and constructive comments?

What advice and reminding might farmers-beef producers in particular-give to industry experts, especially those that primarily represent segments of the beef and livestock industry beyond-the-farm-gate.

Knowing farmers as we do, we suspect that beef producers probably would begin by reviewing their predicament.

The remaining beef producers have faced decades of decline in per capita consumption of their product. Projected domestic per capita beef consumption in 2010 is estimated to be 60.1 retail pounds-down 37 percent from the 1976 peak of 94.4 pounds.

The current economic crisis and high unemployment numbers have certainly added downward pressure to the long-term trend.

The export situation is not that great either. Again focusing on beef, for the decade prior to the BSE events in the mid-2000s, beef exports expanded rap-

idly, growing to over five times the export volume of the late 1980s. Nonetheless, the US remained a net importer of beef.

In 2010 beef exports are expected be about 80 percent of their pre-BSE level, and the US is expected to import 25 pounds of beef for every 16 pounds exported.

Clearly, at this point the beef producers and other livestock producers could forcefully remind their industry-expert-counterparts of the importance of cultivating ever-more positive relationships with domestic and export customers.

Then, after that preamble is delivered, we suspect some livestock ranchers and farmers would get to the "meat" of their advice. We do not just suspect but are confident that there are other producers who would want no part in providing such advice to the industry.

Yes, they would say, the livestock industry is being challenged on issues ranging from BSE and E. coli O157:H7 to antibiotic use, air and water quality issues, animal identification and traceback, country of origin labeling (COOL), and the conditions under which animals are being raised.

The perceptions, comments, advice and reminders provided by livestock producers to industry spokespeople, especially those representing the portions of the livestock industry beyond-the-farm-gate, might read something like the following:

Industry spokespeople's response to these issues has been to attack the critics and then provide answers that make some in the industry feel better but do little to assuage consumer concerns.

In responding to the issues that have been raised, industry representatives suggest that the critics have one agenda in mind: the destruction of the meat industry. Undoubtedly some critics feel that eating meat is an immoral act and would welcome the end of meat production for human consumption. On the other hand, we would venture to say that most who express concern about these issues maintain meat as an important part of their diet.

Industry leaders should keep in mind that while it is easy to view "this" as a dispute between meat producers and those that would like to see the meat industry disappear, an "us" and "them" battle of that

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sort is likely to be counterproductive. The real battle is for the hearts and minds of John Q. and Jill E. Public. And so far the industry has ended up with a black eye.

John and Jill are told by industry officials that science says that small animal crates and cages are not cruel. But the Publics see photos and film in which veal, sows, and laying hens have little-to-no room to maneuver. As Urban Lehner of DTN asks: Are they going to believe industry or "their own eyes?"

The Publics hear and see stories about children and adults dying from E. coli O157:H7 and other foodborne illnesses. They are told by industry officials that the meat is USDA inspected, but then learn that what is inspected are slaughtering and processing plants' records, not the meat itself.

In the minds of the Publics, "USDA Inspected" brings to mind the hands-on inspection processes of the past, not the inspection of HACCP records-note: the USDA probably should have changed its labeling when it changed the system of regulating packing plants.

In addition, John and Jill learn that recalls are voluntary and plants are in charge of developing meat safety protocols for their plants, not the USDA. They also read stories that some slaughter plants will not sell meat to processors who test their product for E. coli. John and Jill are surprised and perplexed.

Stories of industry representatives arguing that the testing of whole beef cuts for E. coli at slaughter plants is not warranted make little sense when they also read that slaughter plants are virtually the only possible "original" source of contamination.

John and Jill hear the same industry organization say that needle-tenderized meat is as safe as non-tenderized meat even though food scientists report that the tenderizing needles can introduce surface contaminants into the interior of the cut of meat, including E. coli O157:H7.

When it comes to antibiotics, the Publics learn that some species of healthy meat animals are routinely given antibiotics even though their children suffering from colds and the flu are refused these same antibiotics because of antibiotic-resistance concerns.

In sum, much of what the Publics hear is contrary to their long-held beliefs about the meat industry, USDA inspections, "overuse" of antibiotics, and, most of all, that the consumer is always right, whether she wants to know which country produced the meat she buys or, as an importer, the stipulation that entering beef be tested for BSE.

Some livestock producers might close with a plea to industry spokespeople to take better care so as not to further erode or impede the demand for their products.

In the long-run, it may be better to admit that certain adjustments need to be made and go about facilitating those adjustments than to evade issues or construct defenses that sound unbelievable.

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