

Understanding Sustainability

Defining “sustainability” is a daunting task, but cattle producers have to be able to understand and incorporate the term into their operations to be successful today.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

If you were asked to define the word “sustainability” in regard to agriculture, could you put together an accurate and descriptive definition? Could you use it in a sentence?

Sara Place, chief sustainability officer at Elanco, says sustainability is a broad term cattle producers and other agriculturists often find intimidating. A new understanding of the term can help producers promote it at their own operation.

Look it up

“I like this idea of thinking of sustainability as a Venn diagram,” Place says. Her graph breaks the idea of sustainability into three categories — environmental, economics and social. When all three topics are prioritized, an operation has a grasp on being sustainable.

The first segment of the graph is dedicated to the environmental footprint agriculturists create during the production cycle, Place says. It is also the biggest factor consumers talk about.

On the economic side of things,

Place says producers should be asking themselves questions like, “Can people afford this food?” and, “Can producers afford to make this food?”

She defines the social section of the diagram as a combination of human health, animal welfare and the nutritional needs of both humans and animals.

While Place offers this straightforward model, she says sustainability is a complex subject.

“What’s challenging is we’re trying to balance all three of these areas, and it’s not going to be the same for every operation, every country, every region or even over time,” she says. “We can all have differing views of sustainability based on our values.”

Use it in a sentence

Understanding the definition of sustainability is just half the battle. Producers need to be able to have a discussion with consumers, as well. There are several hot topics circulating in today’s world, and Place says cattle producers should

be prepared to offer transparency on these subjects.

The first conversation is about the overall amount of meat consumed. New studies are consistently being released, Place says. She reveals the public has become unsure of how much meat “is too much.”

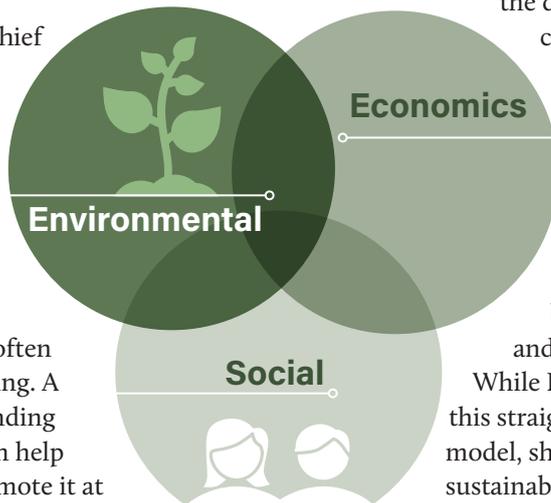
Cattlemen and women need to share the benefits of adding meat to the diet, she says. From the amount of protein offered in a single serving to the numerous nutrients a cut of beef possesses, Place says, beef is a great addition to any meal.

In addition to actively teaching the public meat provides both protein and key nutrients to those who consume it, Place encourages cattle producers to explain how beef products are a sustainable option for the dinner table.

She calls cattle “upcyclers,” meaning they take products of little to no value to humans and turn them into higher-value ones with nutritional value to the consumer. Place says this process is essentially a solar energy capture process.

“Cattle take cellulose and turn it into food products,” she explains. “They’re taking less desirable and indigestible plants, and converting them to animal-source food products.”

About 90% of feed consumed by grain-finished cattle is sourced from products not in competition with



people, Place says. Facts like this are not commonly shared during the sustainability discussion, but Place says it is up to producers to share the truth about their livestock and production process.

Another key issue consumers express concern about in regard to the beef industry is greenhouse gas emissions. Despite all the talk about those “cow farts,” Place says producers have actually lowered total gas emissions while simultaneously increasing production.

Expanding our vocabulary

As the world progresses, Place says producers will have to learn to embrace and promote sustainability

even more in the future.

“Where we are today is no guarantee of where we will be tomorrow,” she explains.

Place reminds producers the world is not static, and progress must always be made — not just by producers in the United States, but by the entire global beef production system. She says the agricultural industry should focus on improving the following areas: grazing management, genetics, animal feed management, processing, feed additives, biotechnology and animal husbandry.

“Where we are today is no guarantee of where we will be tomorrow.” — Sara Place

The battle for sustainability is not a new one and, Place says, isn’t going

away anytime soon. Cattle producers across the country need to understand the term, have open conversations with their customers and

actively fight for forward progress.

In regard to sustainability, Place says, “We can never improve enough.” 

Editor’s note: For more information about sustainability in beef production, visit the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef website at <https://www.usrsb.org/>.



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