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Beef Sustainability Metrics Taking Shape

Six high-priority indicators to measure sustainability by sector have been identified by the multi-stakeholder members of USRSB.

by *Kindra Gordon*, field editor

As the topic of sustainability continues to be discussed within the agricultural industry, the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB) is moving forward with developing metrics to assess sustainable practices within each sector of the beef value chain.

Ben Weinheimer, vice president of the Texas Cattle Feeders Association and co-chair of the Sustainability Indicators Working Group within the USRSB, provided an update to cattle industry representatives attending the February 2017 Cattle Industry Convention in Nashville, Tenn.

Weinheimer noted that the three pillars of sustainability include considerations for the environment, economics and social aspects of the business. He said this correlates with planet, profit, people and animals. Within those parameters, he explained that six high-priority indicators to measure sustainability by sector have been identified, and agreed upon, by the multi-stakeholder members of USRSB. These indicators include:

- ▶ animal health and well-being;
- ▶ efficiency and yield;
- ▶ water resources;
- ▶ land resources;
- ▶ air and greenhouse gas emissions; and
- ▶ worker safety and well-being.

Based on those six indicators, the USRSB

is now working to develop metrics that cow-calf producers, feeders and packers can utilize to assess a benchmark for where their operation is with regard to sustainability, and implement efforts for continuous improvement.

As examples, proposed metrics for cow-calf producers to assess within the specific categories include:

- ▶ Within the water resources indicator: Is a grazing management plan (or equivalent) being implemented?
- ▶ Within the efficiency and yield indicator: Is there a strategy to optimize animal productivity through improved nutrition, reproduction, genetics, technologies and practices?
- ▶ Within the animal health and well-being metric: Are Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) principles incorporated into management of the farm or ranch?
- ▶ Within the employee safety and well-being metric: Are stockmanship and safety practices implemented on the farm or ranch?

Similar metrics for feedlot and packer entities are also being proposed. Weinheimer emphasized that the proposed metrics are a self-assessment tool only. He says the USRSB “will not mandate” any protocols across the supply chain.

Weinheimer stated, “We [USRSB] are trying to keep at the forefront that the sustainability effort be reasonable and feasible for cattlemen.” He noted that because the USRSB is a global effort, it also must be flexible enough to be applied country to country.

Weinheimer also explained that for producers interested in having second- and third-party certification or verification claims for marketing, that is their choice, but will not be dictated in the USRSB metrics.

Looking ahead, Weinheimer reports that the final metric report will be voted on by USRSB members during the General Assembly Meeting in July 2017. It will then go to public comment. Once the final metrics are accepted, USRSB will provide guidance, resources and tool kits to aid in the implementation of the sustainability metrics being utilized as self-assessment tools within the industry.

Ultimately, the objective of the USRSB is to maintain consumer confidence in beef as a sustainable food through research and benchmark efforts to document — and improve — the sustainability of beef. Learn more about the effort at www.usrsb.org.



Editor's Note: Field Editor Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattlegirl from Whitewood, S.D. This article was written as part of *Angus Media's* coverage of the 2017 Cattle Industry Convention. For further coverage, visit www.angus.media.