

SUSTAINABILITY: *Friend* OR Foe?

Open discussion could lead to producer-led solutions.

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

If there ever was a story that brings up more questions than answers, it's sustainability.

To some the word represents opportunity, to others a sham. Some people consider it a buzzword, long overused and poorly defined. Still others see it as a chance to show that cattlemen have always cared for the land and animals and can now prove it.

No matter where you fall on that spectrum, you've probably noticed sustainability is a topic that has grown in both frequency and volume all along the beef production chain during the last decade.

"We don't have all the answers," says Mark McCully, CEO of the American Angus Association. "We don't even fully know all the questions, but that's why it's important that we are talking about it."

National conferences feature speakers, ag media headlines proclaim the importance, and associations and companies call together working groups and committees, but if sustainability still feels like a thing talked about at far-off meetings with little application on the day-to-day ranch chores, read on.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

"I think why it's honestly taken so long is the topic is just so complicated and the term is so big," McCully says. "Depending on who you are talking to and at what point in the supply chain they are in, they probably define sustainability a little bit differently."

Though many times cattlemen equate sustainability simply to the environment — things like water quality and carbon credits — McCully says it's more than that.

Almost every major agricultural company and organization has published a tagline summing up their sustainability goals (see sidebar on page 38), and though

phrasing is unique, most gravitate toward a common set of ideals, says Josh White, executive director of producer education and sustainability for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA).

"It's all about good management practices and doing the right thing, helping the land, helping the cattle, making a profit, and keeping people healthy," he says.

In short, the things cattlemen are historically good at.

Angus breeder John Wessel, Colesburg, Iowa, says he thinks sustainability is about financial viability, ensuring a legacy that can be passed on to the next generation — a legacy that includes taking care of the land.

“It means something different for every person, somewhat based upon environment, based upon the direction and goals of your program, somewhat based upon what’s the direction of their family and where they’re heading with this business,” Wessel says.

However, when consumers hear “sustainability,” their first thought is not emissions or land use.

“We’re seeing a lot of data come out now that shows when consumers are asked about sustainability, they’re actually thinking about animal welfare,” says Michelle Calvo-Lorenzo, chief animal welfare officer for Elanco, admitting many cattlemen bristle at that term. “The word ‘welfare’ itself has a negative connotation to it because of all the activist efforts and activities that are so violent and negative and drive a lot of misconception.”

Yet, producers have been about welfare long before the word was hijacked, she says.

“The animal has always been at the heart of us understanding how we can optimize what we can get out of the animal,” Calvo-Lorenzo says. “I think it’s widely recognized that a healthy, well-cared for animal will thrive.”

The 2021 Power of Meat® Survey shows animal welfare ranks in the top four influences on grocery shoppers’ meat choices, along with topics like “nutrition” and “the planet.” In the survey, 44% of people think the meat they buy comes from humanely treated animals, but 40% say “Don’t know.”

“The risk is very high for losing consumer trust,” Calvo-Lorenzo says. “Animal activists make up something like 1-4% of the population. They are the loudest, they are violent and they are visible because of social media.

“We must continue to not only just make progress in how we care for cattle, but we also need to demonstrate that progress through verification processes or voluntary audits. If not, we risk losing trust with our consumers,” she says.

There are small-scale programs already in place across the industry. For example, AngusLinkSM has the Cattle Care and Handling option. In the future these programs may evolve to play a larger role.

White points to Beef Quality Assurance (BQA), which more than 200,000 producers have completed, as an existing tool that can help document progress.

“We’ve got to lead with welfare,” White notes.

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— Mark McCully,

CEO of the American Angus Association

TO LEAD OR NOT TO LEAD?

But does the cattle business even need to lead at all? Perhaps this is a flash in the pan, a trend those who are raising beef don’t even need to address.

The question surfaced again during the 2021 annual business meeting.

“The fact that we are engaging in this unwinnable debate when we have record consumption and record demand seems frivolous to me,” said Chris Earl, Maxwell, N.M., during the 2021 National Angus Convention & Trade Show in Fort Worth, Texas. “We have much more items within the Association that deserve our time and effort.”

Earl suggests the sustainability topic is being brought into the industry through the “back door” and is driven by a dishonest agenda with political motives. He encouraged other producers to join him in voicing concern.

“When the collective gets spoken for, it’s usually not our message,” Earl said. “Independence is our strength, and diversity is our strength, so the moment we try to speak a collective, I’ve got to be honest with you, what I’ve seen on this, you don’t speak for me.”


Wessel says he is generally “guarded” when certain groups talk sustainability because he envisions blanket rules handed down to cattlemen who are already doing the right thing on their own.

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Sustainability slogans

Search a favorite ag or food company or organization for “sustainability,” and you’re likely to find their stance. Here are a few quick examples of taglines from around the beef business:

 *People, product, planet.* — **Sysco**

 *Empowering people, customers and community. Conserving natural resources and protecting our planet. Innovating smart and responsible agriculture.* — **Tyson**

 *Environmentally sound, socially responsible, economically viable beef.*
— **U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef**

 *To deliver safe nutritious meat, poultry and dairy, balanced diets, good jobs and thriving communities. To provide the most humane care and raise healthy animals. To protect the land, air and water we all share.* — **Protein PACT, led by the North American Meat Institute and industry partners**

“Do you know any farmer doing a worse job than what he did 10 years ago?” he asks. “So why don’t we tell that story instead of saying, ‘OK, you guys want us to fit in this sustainability bubble or quadrant, and we’ll try to shift our entire organization that way.’”

John Stika, president of Certified Angus Beef (CAB), has watched consumer interest in how cattlemen produce beef grow during his more than two decades at the brand. For years they’ve fostered an understanding of what happens on the ranch and in the feedyard, bringing beef buyers to cattle country. Simply wanting to know more is still at the heart of all of these conversations, he says.

“They’re not asking us, ‘What do producers need to do differently?’” he says. “They’re asking us, ‘What’s your platform, and how are you able to give us confidence that the brand we’re carrying in our stores or placing on our menu is produced in a way that makes us feel good about being part of the brand?’”

Stika says most consumers are aware of the topic of sustainability, but today it’s the longtime partners who point to the potential result of doing nothing.

“What’s at risk is the trust of consumers,” Stika says. “You begin to lose trust over time. But what’s probably more concerning short term is that if you lose the initial trust of a customer and they then make that decision for the consumer.”

If a large foodservice distributor, retailer or restaurateur decides to offer another brand, product or protein, such as alternative meats, because it checks the

boxes, “I think what’s at risk longer-term is that erosion of trust among consumers and that then begins to impact consumption,” Stika says.

It often feels like two story lines developing.

“I think a lot of [breeders] are maybe at this point: Is this a friend or is this a foe?” McCully says. “Some producers probably feel like we can’t give them an inch, because if we add here or change behaviors in this area, guess what? They’re coming with a list of other things. I think that’s a valid question.”

Wessel works in the seed-corn business and has seen that very scenario play out with an area farmer who has moved from waterway buffers to strip till to no-till.

His customer tells him, “I started down this path, and I’m starting to believe I’m never going to satisfy what their needs are.”

“If the Association starts down this path, how do we satisfy the people driving this movement?” he asks. “Where does it end?”

Wessel wants to be sure it doesn’t end with the inability to produce livestock all together.

“I don’t want to be narrow-minded and say, ‘Just leave me alone. I’ll do it on my own,’” he says. “I’m not sure if that’s the right answer either, but I see so many complications with trying to find what the right answer is for the entire population across the country that I don’t know how we get it right without having a bunch of unintended consequences.”

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WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Many experts say the majority of today's consumers aren't making purchasing decisions in a significant way based on sustainability today, but they're talking about it more. However, Technomic data presented during the North American Meat Institute (Meat Institute) summer conference, shows about half of consumers in their prime food spending years (25-44) report they are eating less meat due to animal welfare concerns.

Regardless of where the pressure is coming from, it has reached the corporate level.

"Sustainability is a metric that publicly traded companies are being measured on," McCully says. "They're being graded on it, and they are responding to that."

Someday access to capital could be tied to sustainability practices. There is already government intervention.

"It really doesn't matter whether you believe in climate change or not, sustainability and the climate discussion is absolutely real. The discussion is going to change perceptions," says Debbie Lyons-Blythe, a White City, Kan., Angus producer.

She has been involved with the NCBA task force on the topic and is a longtime producer member of the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef Production (USRSB).

"If we don't get involved in the discussions here near the beginning and show that we are absolutely working toward a better planet, then it's going to end up that we're faced with legislation or regulation that we've not been a part of."

It's not too late, but the conversations are happening now, Lyons-Blythe says. That's why NCBA and others are setting their own targets and trying to make sure improvements in sustainability measures also make good business sense.

"Let's be part of the rule-making committee instead of being told what to do," suggests Darrell Stevenson, an Angus breeder from Hobson, Mont.

He is wary of where the push is coming from, but grants that it's very real just the same.

"The sustainability craze is pushing beyond meat counters and retail outlets. There is literal congressional debate and tax structures being proposed. There is public pressure on politicians and businesses to change their practices."

There is still time to influence research targets and build metrics.

"I believe it's important to stay out in front of it and have some of these initiatives be producer-led, so we can build them in such a way that they are cost-effective and don't require a lot of additional investment," McCully says.

It's more manageable to apply if cattlemen create solutions that work at the speed of commerce.

Stevenson notes, "To a small degree, we've been through this before. The cow-calf sector has been pressured to improve several management practices."

He points to the lack of preconditioning and backgrounding 50 years ago. More recently there's been pressure on growth promotants and antibiotic use.

"In every case, each change was met with resistance and market-driven for implementation. These practices are now all commonplace," he says.

WHAT NOW?

If a cattleman does want to get involved, the next question is where to start.

"We're kind of being dragged away from that handshake into the documentation. A little bit away from, 'trust us to say we're doing the right thing' to actually proving it," White says.

That could be a verification program or some program required by those buying cattle or beef.

"It's hard to point at anything in the market today that's a signal that's being sent," McCully says, beyond some niche programs around animal care. "It's not being felt in the market yet, so I think it's a good time to be thinking about it, talking about it and planning for it, because I do believe we are going to start seeing market signals. I don't ever want any of our cattlemen to find themselves in a spot where they're at a disadvantage in the market that could have been prevented."

The USRSB has partnered with the Noble Foundation to create a self-assessment tool to help cow-calf producers get a baseline of where they are.

"I don't want producers to be afraid of the conversation because, quite frankly, most of it is best management practices," Lyons-Blythe says.

Encouraging a grazing management plan, having transition plans in place and keeping good records — those are goals of the USRSB that could improve ranch-level profitability, too.

Much of the sustainability research is still taking place, so exact recommendations may change over time, especially in animal welfare, Calvo-Lorenzo says.



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“We thrive when our animals thrive, and they can only do that when they’re in a positive state of welfare. We have to think beyond productivity, beyond animal health,” she says. “Positive states of welfare also include animal comfort and mental state, because they are what we recognize today as sentient beings. They can feel things. This is important for daily interactions with cattle and adopting best management practices.”

One of the most apparent actions available today is to take care of the people who are taking care of the cattle.

“Animal welfare issues aren’t only a four-legged problem; sometimes it’s a two-legged problem,” Calvo-Lorenzo says.

Better care may require more effective training for hired help, acknowledging good animal caretakers, breaking out of traditional animal-handling norms or just learning more about animal behavior, she says.

There is a balance between telling the story of the great things the industry is already doing and having a sincere desire to make improvements beyond that, Calvo-Lorenzo says.

Cue Angus producers who want to have a voice.

“We can’t let the tail wag the dog, but instead of being reactionary and defending our noble position, I believe that Angus has an opportunity to be a true leader,” Stevenson says. “It’s not our job as Angus to pick winners and losers, but if there is an opportunity to better our story while creating value, we can help the membership.”

In McCully’s mind, the biggest of all the sustainability questions may not be the what or the who — it’s the why.

“I think we all collectively need to ask, if we don’t defend our product, who’s going to?” [A](#)