

To Survive: Cattlemen Must Become Politically Active



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Cattlemen must become more politically active if they want to survive beyond the 1980's. Historically, cattlemen have concentrated on production and have shied away from political activity. Other segments of our economy and our government are forcing us into the political arena because they fail to understand or refuse to consider the complexities of agriculture and the importance of the agricultural industry to this nation's economy.

It is no longer enough for a cattleman to become politically active on election day and to ignore issues that affect his survival the rest of the year. It is mandatory that cattlemen get involved. You should not only join your state and national cattlemen's association but be active in these organizations by working to have an input into their decisions.

Cattle producers should also get to know their elected representatives in the state and the national government. More important, write and/or talk to these representatives regularly. Most representatives put a great deal of emphasis on the letters, telegrams and phone calls from people who take the time to communicate.

The National Cattlemen's Association (NCA) is our official voice in Washington. It represents the cattleman's view point and its policy is developed by cattlemen active in its committees

and on its board. The NCA has done a good job representing cattlemen. None of us are in complete agreement with everything the NCA does, but, the only way we would agree 100 per cent is to make all the decisions ourselves. Our best bet is to join the NCA and to work hard to make the NCA stronger and more effective, and then through participation have direct input into their decision making process.

One very important issue, being spearheaded by the NCA, is the upcoming Beferendum. We are going to get a second chance to vote on the Beef Research and Information Act, and we can't afford to let it slip through our fingers this time. To pass, it needs the unqualified support by every conscientious cattleman.

There are some people who feel that good state supported beef programs are all that are necessary to properly promote beef. This simply isn't enough. Vegetable oil producers are spending literally millions of dollars each year to mislead consumers into believing that vegetable oil with "no cholesterol" is healthy and that animal protein is unhealthy. It is going to take a lot of high priced talent and a lot of dollars just to overcome the damage that has already been done, and it must be directed at a national audience.

Unfortunately, many of the nutrition decision makers in Washington are not well informed. Furthermore, they too, often base their decisions on what is good politically rather than on what

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is good nutritionally. They, like many others, are influenced by what they read and see on television, and that means they are exposed to very little that benefits the beef cattle industry. If the truth is going to be known, then we, the cattle producers in this country, are going to have to spread it.

What's more, we need to pass the Beferendum because we need to put more research dollars into beef, especially into new product research. There has been a dramatic increase in orange juice consumption that can be directly related to new product research and promotion paid for by producers. Broiler and egg producers fund research that helps increase sales and improve their product. Even prune producers have a well funded program. The beef industry, however, is not currently sponsoring new product research. Beef is the most desirable product in the supermarket today. But we can't assume that this is going to continue if we refuse to promote and develop our product.

Just because it will only take a 50 per cent vote of the registered cattlemen to pass the Beferendum this time,

doesn't mean that it will be an easy task. There is still some opposition within the cattle industry. And there is opposition to the referendum outside the industry. This comes from people and organizations who would prefer to see farmers and cattlemen remain split and going their separate ways. This make us less of a threat, and much easier to deal with politically.

If you have any doubt about just how much political clout national politicians think cattlemen have, look at what has happened recently in Washington.

A concentrated effort by the NCA and other groups got Congress to pass a meat import bill. This was positive. It showed what can be accomplished with the industry working together. But what happened? The President vetoed the bill in an effort to show consumers that he was fighting inflation. In other words, the political benefits of vetoing the bill outweighed the political consequences of turning down a bill that would stabilize the cattle market and stimulate herd rebuilding.

It seems evident that the President and few in his administration, are going to recognize the fact publicly, that, not only do beef prices go up, but they

also come down, contrary to what happens to almost all other consumer prices. We cattlemen are going to have to have representatives in Washington who continually and forcefully make this point to him, his advisers and to the press, and to look after the other interests of cattle people. And you are going to have to help supply the funds to do this.

But as we said in the beginning, funds aren't enough. You have to be involved. This means, among other things, knowing your Congressman and Senator in Washington, and letting them know how you feel about issues that affect you. Congressmen pay attention to their mail, particularly if it is an opinion expressed sincerely by one of the people who helped put them in office. Your telephone call, your telegram, and your letter can make a big difference on how he votes on many issues. 