

Risk or Opportunity?

Sustainability has quickly become common in the rancher's vernacular, but finding a common definition has proved to be a challenge.

by Julie Mais, editor

Addressing sustainability's risk or opportunity in the livestock industry during Angus University, sponsored by Merck Animal Health, Nov. 4, at Angus Convention in Columbus, Ohio, was Cameron Bruett, corporate affairs and sustainability at JBS USA.

Bruett spoke to the challenge of defining sustainability — a simple internet search yields multiple definitions. This includes environmental and business classifications.

"But sustainability is truly about longevity," Bruett said. "It's about the perseverance of your operation. Can you do better today than you did yesterday so you have the opportunity to achieve tomorrow?"

Doing more with less

When considering business sustainability, Bruett said there's a simple concept — meeting the needs of the present responsibly while giving the next generation the ability to responsibly meet their own needs.

"We don't want to make a profit today by sacrificing the future generation," he added. "Keep this definition simple. Do more with less. That's the hallmark of sustainability. Doing more with less has been at the heart of agriculture since the start."

Why is it important for farms and ranches to be sustainable?

Bruett answered, "From a very basic standpoint, it's important because a sustainable business can survive shocks. They may be environmental, social, political or trade imbalances. It just means that you persevere."

Bruett said cattlemen can leverage this issue as an opportunity for the industry as a whole.

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"You're creating economic value, not only for yourself, not only for your family, not only for your operation, but for society at large," he said. "You are all creating an essential good that's necessary and being consumed around the world. It's an honorable institution and it's creating value and it's contributing to the greater society."

This great opportunity also comes with challenges, Bruett said, addressing some misinformation shared about sustainability and the livestock industry.

The 2006 report 'Livestock's Long Shadow' described livestock production around the world as

being responsible for 18% of all global man-made greenhouse gas emissions.

"The same report says this level of greenhouse gas emission responsibility for the livestock sector was more than global transport, airplanes, trains, automobiles, golf carts, you name it," Bruett added.

However, the conclusion was not actually correct.

"Yet it is the most common narrative you will hear about livestock anywhere you go," Bruett said. "Now, the United Nations put out a retraction and says, 'Oh, we probably did this wrong. We probably need to adjust.' But the damage was done. We're all living with it today."

Bruett shared facts from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that refutes that particular negative narrative.

"[The EPA reported] U.S. livestock production is only responsible for 3.4% of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States and transportation's nearly one-third," he said.

Modern beef production really does do more with less. If you compare modern beef production to what it was 30 years ago, the difference is striking.

"We produce 13% more beef today with 13% fewer animals, 30% less land, 20% less feed," Bruett explained. "So, the next time someone tells you that our industry is unsustainable,

you should ask them what they mean by sustainability, because by our measures, we're about as sustainable as it gets."

Why is this information so easily misguided? Bruett suggested it's because out of the 325 million people living in the United States, less than 1% claim farming as an occupation and 2% live on farms.

"This means 1% is feeding the 99%," he said. "So now we have questions to answer that we never had to answer before: 'Where's my food come from?'"

Transparency

For today's farmers and ranchers, transparency is their new reality.

"If you can't defend it in public, you shouldn't do it in private," he said. "So, if you're running a business and your business is to ultimately provide goods to an end consumer and you know your end

consumer is asking all of these questions ... your response should be 'I've got to start thinking about how I can answer some of those questions to keep that consumer, who's making my livelihood possible, happy.'"

To understand the consumer, cattlemen need to know a little bit about the millennial generation.

"This is the greatest economic generation ever," Bruett said. "They have more buying power than any generation before them. They are

powerful. They are armed with information. They have beliefs and causes they are passionate about."

More than 50% of Millennials try to purchase a product from a company that they like and one that supports the causes they care about.

"What does that mean?" Bruett asked. "It means we have to make sure our business is emitting the right types of beliefs and values that align with this need. This is a good thing."



Cameron Bruett explained why cattle producers should be excited about the trials facing modern agriculture: it is the most innovative era in the history of mankind.

To address the desires of this consumer group, Bruett said the livestock industry has an opportunity to brand itself to show sensitivity toward their wants.

"We want to provide new and innovative products that they'll look into," he said.

And, change isn't optional.

"Change is happening whether we like it or not," he added. "Now these are just facts. How we, as a collective industry, decide how to address this

sentence is up to us. Destiny is in our hands. Some companies have chosen to invest in test-tube meat. Others have tried to innovate new cuts, new products; but the fact is, this is our reality. Change is no longer optional for us."

Global insight

Bruett said the real sustainability issue, however, is the growing global population and growth in

the middle-income class in countries like China, Africa and South America, and their desire to purchase high-quality animal protein.

"There's 7.6 billion people on the planet today," he explained. "By 2030, that'll be 8.5 billion. By 2030, of that growth, 3 billion of those will be people entering the middle class.

Bruett described the opportunities.

"Global protein demand from 2010 to 2030 is simply

going to explode. From less than 300 million tons in 2010 to over 400 million tons in 2030. I think this is the most exciting time to be involved in agriculture in the history of mankind. We have the most diverse agricultural system ever. We can produce anything and ship it anywhere and have it enjoyed by billions of global consumers all around the world." AJ