

Public Concerns About Animal Care Are Limited

Consumers continue to have very positive perceptions of the beef and cattle industry, and issues like animal welfare and possible effects of cattle production on the environment are not having any significant effect on demand for beef at this time. Only a very small minority of consumers is critical of the ways in which producers treat their cattle and use natural resources like land and water.

Those are the principal findings of a checkoff-funded survey of consumers which was conducted by The Wirthlin Group, a leading attitude research firm. The study, sponsored by the Beef Promotion and Research Board, was managed for the industry by the National Cattlemen's Foundation.

Consumers' generally high regard for the beef industry is based primarily on positive perceptions of beef by many consumers and, to a lesser degree, on public perceptions of the people and lifestyle associated with raising cattle. There are some fairly strong negatives, too, however. In response to an open-ended, unaided question about attitudes toward the industry, some 10 percent of consumers mention concerns about fat and cholesterol and about hormones and antibiotics. It appears that any concerns about safety are not now being translated into avoidance of beef.

Another Wirthlin survey – of beef cattle, dairy and veal producers – indicated that many producers underestimate consumer concerns about things like safety, animal care and environmental impact. However, the survey suggests, most producers want to do more in the way of "educating" the general public about these issues than appears to be advisable on the basis of current public attitudes. The Wirthlin researchers warn that overdoing consumer "education" on issues about which by far most persons do not have concerns can elevate the issues and cause more harm than good to the industry.

Implications of the consumer survey are that the industry is on track in providing background information to media personnel and other thought leaders and in responding as needed to consumers. While animal rights activists and others have been very vocal, their claims are not now affecting beef purchases. It is generally best, the public issues experts say, to refrain from confrontations and from aggressive consumer education programs on

specific issues like safety, animal rights and the environment.

The recently completed consumer survey is part of an industry strategic plan aimed at dealing with the animal care issue. Most questions were related to animal treatment, but some questions dealt with safety and the environment and, to some extent, health and nutrition.

Here are key findings from the telephone survey of 1,000 representative American adults.

-In a "thermometer" rating of the beef industry, the cattle business gets a rating of 71.4 (considered very good), only slightly lower than ratings of agriculture in general and of the dairy industry,

-Almost 70 percent of consumers report eating beef two or more times a week – slightly higher than for poultry and much higher than for pork. However, 25 percent say they are eating less beef than a year earlier. Major consumer interests or concerns related to beef include taste, nutrition, price and safety.

-There is no evidence that negative opinions related to the way cattle are treated or to the impact of cattle raising on the environment have any measurable effect on individuals' attitudes toward the industry or on their beef eating.

-A small minority (13 percent) says that animals have "rights;" two percent say beef is not meant for human consumption.

-Some 68 percent of consumers believe that cattle are treated humanely 14 percent believe cattle are treated inhumanely; and 18 percent have no opinion. Most respondents say producers treat cattle properly because it is in their own interest to have healthy cattle and because they care about animals.

--Two-thirds of consumers feel there is no need for animal welfare groups to play a "watchdog" role over cattle production. However, because they do not want animals to be mistreated, almost half would vote for state regulations on cattle treatment. Large numbers would back away from such a view if it were shown that such regulations would cost "millions" in taxes, if beef prices were increased by 15 percent, or if producers were driven out of business.

-Seventy percent of consumers believe cattle ranchers and farmers take good care of land and water. Only 12 percent say producers aren't good caretakers,

and 18 percent have no opinion. Many consumers say it is in producers' own interest to take proper care of resources for which they are responsible. Substantial majorities say cattle production causes little or no damage to the atmosphere, wildlife, rivers and streams, or pasture and range land. Almost 60 percent say cattle grazing is a good use of public rangeland.

-Almost 80 percent say that private ownership and control are better than government ownership of ag land.

-Seventy percent reject the argument that beef production is using up natural resources and that consumers should cut their beef consumption.

Wirthlin experts suggest these approaches to dealing with animal care and other special issues:

1. Carry on communications programs to reinforce consumers' positive perceptions of beef and of "hard-working, dedicated" beef producers.
2. Focus on a theme like "cattle producers are dedicated to providing safe, wholesome food."
3. Gear public information programs to the majority of consumers, not to fringe groups. One key audience for the longer term is young people. Other key audiences now are lawmakers, media personnel and other thought leaders. Identify supporters or neutral authorities and let them carry messages to the public.
4. Seek out third party endorsements, from scientific groups, for example. Let third party sources, more credible than industry sources, show that the extremists' claims are "ridiculous."

The Wirthlin Group also surveyed 500 beef producers, 200 dairymen, 100 veal growers and 250 persons in allied fields. In line with industry structure, most of the responding producers have less than 100 cattle.

Most producers indicated concern about public attitudes toward such issues as animal care. And most indicated a belief that the main problem is one of improving public perceptions rather than changing products or practices.

Smaller percentages of producers also recommended taking steps to improve facilities or conditions for animals; do a better job of controlling waste and use of land; and eliminate use of chemicals and feed additives.