

Joe Hampton:

Passion drives Illinois Angus breeder to serve and to pave the way for youth in agriculture.

A Leader Profile

BY BARB BAYLOR ANDERSON



BARB BAYLOR ANDERSON PHOTOS

Joe Hampton, an Angus breeder from Windsor, Ill., was named Illinois director of agriculture in January 1999.

Joe Hampton does things passionately — on his farm, for his state, and around the world. He makes the most of every day, whether he's at home in Windsor, Ill., or serving producers as Illinois director of agriculture from his office in Springfield, Ill.

But if you ask Hampton what makes him tick, he'll say it's working with youth to pave the way for the next generation in agriculture.

"Nothing beats working with kids. You have to live life like it's the real thing, not like it is a dress rehearsal for something else,"

says the gentle-natured, 55-year-old Angus producer, who was appointed Illinois director of agriculture in January 1999. "Life is a journey, and you have to make the most of it."

And Hampton has. He has championed agricultural issues for most of his life, including stints as chairman of the Illinois Corn Marketing Board and chairman of the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF). He has served on the boards of both the U.S. Grains Council and the National Corn Development Foundation.

■ An ag leader

As a national agricultural leader, Hampton has had the opportunity to travel around the world and to help open markets for U.S. agricultural producers. Through his work with the USMEF, Hampton gained extensive experience in international marketing and trade.

He represented the U.S. red meat industry at the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations in Washington, D.C., and Geneva, Switzerland,

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as well as in meetings with European Union (EU) agricultural commissioners and in sessions with East European and former Soviet republic officials.

He has traveled on behalf of U.S. producers to Mexico and Japan. Most recently, he discussed agricultural issues with Fidel Castro during a humanitarian mission to Cuba with Illinois Governor George Ryan.

But even with all of these experiences under his belt, Hampton considers his most notable accomplishments those close to home. For example, when state regulations changed several years ago and the local funeral home could no longer service ambulance calls, Hampton helped form a service of volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs) for his hometown and surrounding townships.

"Somebody needed to take care of it," he says simply, then quickly adds, "But of all of the things that I have done, I am most proud I was a 4-H club leader with my wife, Anne, in Shelby County. There's nothing like working with the little guys and watching them develop their dreams."

■ Angus ties

Hampton's passion for working with young people fostered his and Anne's interest in the Angus business. Their children, Heather and Chris, spent summers in the showring. Today, Heather and husband, Brian Knodle, and Chris and wife, Cindy, continue to play integral roles in the Hampton's Angus cow-calf and corn-soybean operations.

"We put bulls in the Midland and Southern Illinois University tests each year and market bred heifers," he says. "We haven't had cattle in the showring for several years, but it was some of the best times we had."

Good times, Hampton says, because of the "sense of community" that permeates the Angus business.

"Angus breeders and their families care a lot about kids," he says. "Everyone puts time and effort into structuring a learning experience for them, and I think that is why there is so much youth involvement in the Angus Association."

Hampton's commitment to youth carries over into his position as Illinois director of agriculture as well. When the Illinois Junior Angus Association was short on funds last summer for a regional show in Springfield, Ill., Hampton found funds within his department's budget to help them.



Hampton spoke about financial plight of farmers during the Illinois State Fair.

"I believe in young people, and want to help them have every opportunity in the cattle business," he says. "I was fortunate to have a 4-H leader and a county agent [who] encouraged me, and I want to help kids in the same way."

■ Words into action

Hampton and others in the department of agriculture are currently leading an agricultural education project with students at Hazel Dell Elementary School in Springfield. The goal is to help bring rural and urban children together by teaching urban children more about the farm experience.

Hampton is working with Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's office to develop a curriculum for the Chicago inner-city school system that will relate the story of agriculture to urban children.

"All of my work is targeted at providing an opportunity for young people to stay involved in farming and ranching," Hampton says. "We are looking for ways to bring profitability back into agriculture."

One of Hampton's priority projects is to help crop and livestock producers pursue value-added sales. To that end, he has created a value-added program within the Illinois Department of Agriculture's marketing division. Program coordinators are charged with helping develop various value-added opportunities by connecting crop and livestock producers with appropriate businesses and government agencies so that producers can remain in agriculture.



Hampton discusses beef industry issues with Eugene Knodle, who raises feeder calves near Fillmore, Ill.

Specifically for beef producers, the department is exploring options that would establish vertically integrated processing facilities.

"Angus producers in Illinois are well-positioned for such opportunities because Illinois is the No. 2 state in terms of meat processing," says Hampton. "If we don't work to keep our beef and pork production in the state, then livestock production here is going to migrate west."

Hampton praises the Angus industry for being a leader in value-added beef production.

"One of the best things Angus breeders do is produce a quality product and put an emphasis on it," he says. "The Angus industry has always been way ahead of the curve on value-added beef production and



Hampton talked with several state commodity-group leaders during Ag Day activities at the Illinois State Fair.



Hampton talks with Julie Dameron outside the showing during the open Angus show at the Illinois State Fair.

in proving that economic traits are important. More beef producers need to work with stakeholders in that way.”

Hampton has aggressively sought resolution to other issues that affect beef producers, including those that impact the environment.

“We passed in 1999 a livestock-management-facilities amendment that sends the message to producers that there is a place for livestock in this state,” he says. The act provides facilities-construction and waste-management guidelines that are targeted at allaying local concerns about livestock production.

Other top environmental issues that affect livestock producers include urban sprawl and water quality. Hampton says his department is monitoring the

Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) proposal for pollution reduction quotas, known as total maximum daily loads (TMDLs), for some of the state’s bodies of water.

In addition, the department is involved in debate about hypoxia in the Gulf of Mexico, which has been linked through research to nitrogen runoff from states along the Mississippi River. Activists argue the oxygen deficit in the water is due to too much nitrogen from crop production.

“We need to be smart about handling environmental issues because the future of livestock production hinges on how we handle them,” Hampton says. “But of all the issues we are working on, biotechnology is the primary concern.”

In November Hampton brought together

for the first time top executives from crop-protection, seed and feed companies; grain handlers and processors; and Illinois commodity and livestock associations to talk about the controversy surrounding the use of biotechnology in agriculture. While Hampton says no consensus was reached about biotechnology’s future, the meeting did raise awareness of how various groups feel about the issue.

“When it comes right down to it, consumers will make the call about biotechnology’s future in food production,” Hampton says. “If it is accepted by consumers, then it will also have to be profitable for producers if we are going to rely on it as a tool in agricultural production.”

■ Consumers will decide

Consumer demand will play a key role in determining the future of the beef industry, Hampton asserts.

“Success centers on consumer acceptance of beef over other protein sources,” he says. “I personally would like to see the beef industry explore more in-depth the health benefits of beef and aggressively keep an eye on the competition. As individual breeders, we need to keep in touch with what consumers want and expect and be receptive to change without changing our value system.”

Hampton says that process begins with young people. “I would hope that the Angus industry will keep the beef business alive in energetic young people and help them make plans for the future,” he says. “That means making breeding decisions that take the industry forward and sharing that information with other breeders and consumers.

“Everyone, from consumers to voters to legislators, has a perception of the beef industry, and we need to do what it takes to make a positive image real to people.”

Hampton encourages Angus breeders to carry that philosophy over into their own lives as well.

“We have the opportunity in this country that even if we fail, we can get up and try again. Not everyone in the world is as fortunate to have that heritage, and those of us who do should perpetuate it,” he says. “Life is a journey, not a destination, and we need to make the most of it.”

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