

Countering Conflicts Against Agriculture

Logger and activist Bruce Vincent said each of us can “HELP” put a stop to the attacks on agricultural industries.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

As a third-generation logger from Libby, Mont., being an advocate and spokesman for his industry was not an original part of Bruce Vincent’s life plan when he joined the family business in 1984 after completing college. But, as the industry his family loved and derived their livelihood from continued to be attacked by self-interest groups, Vincent recognized the need to find and share his voice.

In dealing with what he dubs “the conflict industry” over the last 30-plus years, Vincent has learned many lessons. Today, he continues to share his story and strategies in an effort to help others in agriculture counter the conflict when it targets their industry.

“We [in agriculture] all share one big reality: We can only operate with the consent of the public; it’s called

a social license,” he says. “There is a thin line between environmental sensitivity and environmental insanity. The timber industry was the first one that was targeted, but now I see the social license of ranchers being debated.”

So, what can be done to prevent the grazing industry from going through the public perception and legal battles the timber industry endured in the late 1980s and 1990s?

Vincent says the tide of negativity can be turned — and it starts by disengaging from the conflict and instead listening and engaging with the public.

He explains, “We [the timber industry] used to do rallies and convoys in the street. We even pursued lawsuits and won a few. But it didn’t matter; we were losing in the court of public opinion. The conflict

industry was using us. ... They made us look like Neanderthals.”

Instead of feeding into the controversies, Vincent says his industry began to learn it was better to focus on reaching out to the public, building relationships and focusing on a solution they could both accept.

Strive to H.E.L.P

As he speaks to agricultural audiences today, Vincent uses the acronym H.E.L.P. to give individuals the tools to successfully advocate for their industry.

H stands for humanize. The social norm is to vilify industry, agribusiness and factory farms,” Vincent explains. To combat this, the public needs what he describes as a trusted human face to share their story over the backyard fence.”



To farmers and ranchers he adds, “That face is yours. ... They need to hear from us, not a three-piece suit.”

Vincent also adds, “The new backyard fence by the way is social media — Facebook and Twitter.” He reports, research suggests about three-fourths of the population’s opinion is swayed by what they view from friends and family posted on social media.

“Once we are talking to them, we need to do something that in the timber industry we were terrible at,” Vincent says. “We thought ‘E’ stood for educate. So we stood on street corners and screamed our truth. But we need to first empathize.”

E stands for empathize — then educate.

“We need to understand the concerns of the public. What does the public think are the real issues? It doesn’t matter what we think. It’s what they think, because they give us the social license to operate,” explains Vincent.

Empathy begins by listening to those concerns, he notes. “Our message to the public must let them know: I am listening. I understand. I respect or I share your concerns, and I am working to be part of the answer to those concerns.”

Vincent says once they (the public) know we are listening, then we can try to educate, but the information shared must answer their questions — and we must learn to communicate in language they can understand.

“It’s not science and white papers,” he says. “We must think about the emotions.”

L stands for lead. As engagement and relationship building occurs, Vincent says ag leadership must be working to craft and implement solutions that address the public’s concerns and satisfy the ag industry’s ability to operate as well.

He notes, “If you don’t present a

solution, someone else will come up with one for you. And I can tell you, working toward your solution is better than fighting against a solution being shoved down your throat.”

That said, Vincent says to expect compromise. From his experiences in crafting policy for a Healthy Forest Initiative, he says they realized they could never get the public to accept clear cuts as a management strategy.

“We had to give that up,” he says.

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In the realm of leading, Vincent underscores the importance of working locally.

“If people in your community aren’t on a ranch, they likely have as little information and ag knowledge as the people in the cities,” he says. “Take time to humanize, empathize and educate others at your local level — in the media, schools and among local leaders. Do that before you branch to Denver, Chicago or D.C.”

P stands for participate.

“Add a line item in your business plan for activism,” Vincent emphasizes to all farmers and ranchers. “It means take one hour per work week to do something to share with others about your industry. It’s critical to maintaining your social license and freedom to operate. Participating as an advocate may be volunteering to serve on a committee in an organization. It may be going

into a local school and sharing stories about agriculture. “It can be fun,” Vincent said.

Self-check

Ultimately, Vincent said he has learned to analyze his actions by asking himself: Am I participating in the conflict industry by feeding a fight? Or, am I engaging a strategy that will lead toward a solution?


To this, Vincent says he’s come to realize, “The conflict industry looks for a piñata they can beat on... Don’t participate in their strategy [by fighting].”

Instead, Vincent advises seeking strategies that lead to solutions. In that effort, he said it’s important to ask those involved to define a suitable solution. In the timber industry, the public said they wanted “a healthy forest initiative.” Vincent says, “That’s what we wanted, too.”

From there, they began to establish local stakeholder groups and discussed policy that would result in that solution.

By seeking solutions, Vincent says you can put your industry in a position to be a step ahead of the conflict and controversy that self-interest groups thrive on.

Vincent believes society is ready for a proactive change.

“They are tired of the doom and gloom of the conflict industry,” he says. “Society is tired of hearing what’s wrong — and that’s all the conflict industry has to sell. Society is ready to hear solutions from a real human. They are ready for a new vision of environmentalism.” 

*Editor’s note: Vincent shared his remarks via the Cattlemen’s webinar series hosted by the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association. Listen to his full presentation at www.beefusa.org/cattlemenswebinars.aspx. Vincent has also authored a book titled *Against the Odds*, which details his experiences as an advocate in the timber industry. It is available for purchase on Amazon.com.*