

Building Better Beef

Members of the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef explain the program developed by all segments of the beef supply chain.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

In February 2015, more than 100 members, representing all aspects of the beef supply chain, came together to form the voluntary organization: U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB). It encompasses the five main sectors of the beef supply chain: cow-calf, auction market, feedyard, packer/processor and retail/foodservice.

Some recognizable members include King Ranch Inc.; Certified Angus Beef LLC; Elanco Animal Health; Farm Credit Services of America; Cargill Meat Solutions Corp.; Tyson Foods Inc.; McDonald's Corp.; Walmart; Ducks Unlimited Inc.; and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Beef Interest Group.

The founding members developed the organization with the intention

of building core principles and guidelines to define, promote and perpetuate sustainable beef.

“Collectively, the members represent all sectors of the cattle industry and the production system across the United States,” said Ben Weinheimer of the Texas Cattle Feeders Association and USRSB chair-elect during a webinar hosted by the NCBA. “They represent approximately 30% of the cattle in the country, 80% of the beef process and 28% of U.S. beef consumers.”

The USRSB is a multi-stakeholder initiative developed to advance, support and communicate continuous improvement in sustainability of the U.S. beef value chain. They achieve this through leadership, innovation,

multi-stakeholder engagement and collaboration. The USRSB works to advance, support and communicate continuous improvement in the sustainability of U.S. beef production by educating and engaging the beef value-chain through a collaborative multi-stakeholder effort.

The framework

More than 160 different topics of interest were brought forward during the brainstorming period. These were whittled down to six: animal health and well-being; efficiency and yield; water resources; land resources; air and greenhouse gas emissions; and employee safety and well-being.

“We had a big learning curve and a large area to cover, from the cow-calf



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producer side of things all the way to the retailer side of it,” said Steve Wooten, Beatty Canyon Ranch and USRSB director. “As we were working on indicators and metrics, there was quite a bit of training we had to do to come to a common agreement on how to pick the indicators and ultimately each sector chose their own metrics.”

To set itself apart, the USRSB encourages and promotes continuous improvement through five specific actions:

- 1) identifying sustainability indicators;
- 2) recognizing verification methods;
- 3) generating field project data to test sustainability concepts;
- 4) providing a forum for open discussion, information exchange and program development; and
- 5) offering stakeholders an equal opportunity through membership participation.

The USRSB developed the “Sustainability Assurance Framework” as a road map for their vision of sustainable beef production structured around the six areas of priority. Once the six areas were established, the USRSB began developing segment-specific metrics.

“Each segment of the supply chain looked at those six areas of interest and developed metrics appropriate for their area of specialization in the supply chain,” Weinheimer said. “This led into developing guides to further flesh out the details of the metrics from each sector, making it more meaningful and applicable.”

Six areas of focus for USRSB

1. Animal health and well-being: the cumulative efforts of cattle health, nutrition, care and comfort.
2. Efficiency and yield: Efficiency is the unit of input required to produce a unit of output, and yield is the total product generated per unit of time or space. Both concepts address waste as a negative characteristic and drive toward improved profitability.
3. Water resources: the volume of water consumed by a sector for each process and any impacts on water quality by a sector for each process.
4. Land resources: the stewardship of terrestrial and aquatic habitat in relation to water, soil and biodiversity in an area. Impacts of land use and land use conversion, both caused and prevented by ranching and farming activities.
5. Air and greenhouse gas emissions: the cumulative emissions of pollutants, including particulate matter, greenhouse gases and other gaseous emissions from a sector for each process.
6. Employee safety and well-being: the implementation of safety programs and training to provide a safe workplace and help to prevent workplace accidents and injuries associated with production, processing, and distribution of beef and the relative prosperity of workers employed in those activities.

The final step of the framework involved research projects following cattle through the entire supply chain to evaluate the efforts of the USRSB. The purpose of developing this framework is to provide the industry a place to continue the movement towards more sustainable beef production.

Not rules, guidelines

“The goal was never to specify quantities in any of the areas of interest,” Weinheimer said. “We are working to find plans and practices that can be put in place on ranches, feedyards, processing plants and retail stores to help advance U.S. cattle production.”

The decision-making process for the metrics and guides involved each sector, but authority over specific segments of the line fell on those directly involved in it.

“Even though we would like the metrics to go across all sectors, we

had to realize that we would need sector-specific metrics that were important to that part of the supply chain,” Wooten added. “As we worked on it, when we looked at metrics that did not make positive improvement in the sector, we revised or replaced them. All input came from every sector. We are putting out what the group and each sector felt was the most appropriate.”

The practical application of this group and framework comes from the continuous improvement of the metrics and guides initially developed for

sustainable beef production. The application lies in the details outlined in the guides, though these will not be mandated standards.

“The guides emphasize self-assessment, they are intended to simply provide a guide for what is considered the most appropriate and sustainable practices by colleagues in the cattle industry,” Weinheimer said. “There is no definition of how often these guides and practices should be reviewed. But that is the beauty of it — as they are implemented these tools can be used collectively and improvements can be made on your own time and at your own pace.” **AJ**

Editor's note: The USRSB framework was featured on NCBA's Cattlemen to Cattlemen in May 2018. The full webinar can be found at www.beefusa.org/cattlemenswebinarseries. More information about the framework, membership and the five segments of the beef supply chain can be found at: USRSBframework.org.