

Beef Industry Crystal Ball: 5 Changes to Anticipate

Nebraska Angus breeder Bill Rishel shares his outlook for beef's future.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

“Embrace change no matter how difficult,” said North Platte, Neb., Angus seedstock producer Bill Rishel during his remarks as part of the 2020 Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Symposium hosted virtually June 8-12.

For the event, Rishel was tasked with providing perspective on what the purebred cattle industry will look like in 20 years.

“We will have a beef industry, but producers of the future will have to be willing to adjust and change,” he predicted from his crystal ball. Among the anticipated changes, Rishel highlighted five key paradigm shifts emerging.

1. Regenerative and sustainable approach.

“Twenty years from today we may look back and proclaim the greatest paradigm shift was our ability to accept change and move from an industry that has been primarily a production-oriented business to one that is focused on not only providing a great product to consumers, but connects with consumers in a way that they also appreciate and understand what we do is regenerative and sustainable,” Rishel stated. “Going forward we all need to expand our participation in how we make our industry more sustainable so we can maintain its viability and provide a solid financial foundation by which our enterprises can be successfully transitioned to the next generation.”

The beef industry needs to

communicate to society the message of upcycling, Rishel said.

“Many of our consumers, even the ones that really love beef, want to know that we are doing the right things for the environment and sustainability of our natural resources,” he noted. “Most of us, without question, have always been good stewards of our resources. In many cases, that’s why we are still here.”

“I’m very comfortable suggesting that being able to document how we work to constantly improve our environmental practices will become one of those great paradigm shifts that the next generation will reflect back on 20 years from today,” he continued.

2. Employ traceability.

“The industry needs to get serious about an independent, industry-wide and third-party-verified traceability program for rapid response to major disease outbreak,” Rishel said.

Noting the United States is one of two major beef-producing countries in the world that does not have such a traceability program, he pointed out: “A major disease outbreak could



be devastating to our export markets, and do the same right here at home with a negative impact on the financial health of our industry.”

3. Consumer communication.

“Most importantly, we (the beef industry) must make a greater effort to connect with consumers to tell what we do and how we care,” Rishel emphasized. “It is paramount that all of us in the production segment of the beef industry deliver a unified message to consumers. There truly is no protein — animal or otherwise — that is more natural than beef.”

Rishel also called for breed associations to take a future role of becoming more involved in communicating directly with consumers.

“Going forward,” he reiterated, “one of the most important things we all have to do is become engaged telling the story, communicating with consumers. The future is going to depend on us communicating with the consumer.”

4. Direct-marketing opportunities.

Rishel called direct marketing an important avenue for the future.

“There are examples, I know, of some very young folks that have started their own meat business and are having a great deal of success. It is part of the bigger picture of all of us trying to have that greater relationship with that consumer,” he said. “I think it’s imperative for the sustainability of our industry two decades from now, and it might even develop opportunities for moderate-sized packing facilities.”

5. More genomics.

Rishel cited expected progeny differences (EPDs) and genomics as important contributors toward genetic improvement in the beef industry.

“We’ve only scratched the surface of how genomics will impact the beef industry for the next 20 years,” he observed. “I have no doubt genomics is destined to play a larger role.”

Rishel said he anticipates genomics will aid in developing cattle with an improved bovine immune system, as well as specification feeder cattle with a certain genomic blueprint for health, feedyard performance and carcass merit.

That said, Rishel called it “imperative” the beef industry make every effort to keep genetic and genomic research in the public domain for the future.

“The core value of the purebred cattle industry is the design of genetics for beef cattle improvement,” he said. “If we lose the ability to compete on a level playing field, we may become a cooperator or a genetic multiplier between the germplasm supplier and the commercial beef industry.”

He emphasized, “I believe it is mission-critical for those who want to be in the family purebred cattle enterprise 20 years from today that you get involved with your land-grant institutions and the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) of the United States Department of Agriculture. I have always believed that it is very important to keep as


much research as possible in the public domain — where it’s available to anyone who wants to carve out a living in this business.”

Throughout his remarks, Rishel noted major paradigm shifts that have affected the beef industry during the last 50 years — from the implementation of performance record programs and artificial insemination (AI) to

development of boxed beef, *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand marketing and the National Beef Checkoff Program.

Noting the lamb industry struggles to be represented in today’s meatcase at retail stores, Rishel added, “Think about where we (the beef industry) would be if these programs had not been initiated.”

For the future, he encouraged producers to discuss new and different perspectives.

“While we have great challenges ahead, I think they can be conquered,” he concluded. 

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Editor’s note: To access the archived slides and webinar for this session, as well as other sessions for the symposium hosted virtually this summer, visit the “Newsroom” at www.BIFconference.com. The meeting coverage site provided by Angus Media is made possible through the generous contributions of site sponsors, including the American Angus Association, AngusLinkSM, Albrecht Ranch, Branch View Angus Ranch, Cattle Visions, Connealy Angus, Deer Valley Farm, Express Ranches, Fink Beef Genetics, Genex, Krebs Ranch, Nichols Farms, Penz Angus Ranch, Pollard Farms, Select Sires, Spur Ranch, Sydenstricker Genetics and Yon Family Farms.