



# The Red Meat Industry: There's No Crisis, But . . .

by Ann Gooding  
Photos by Jolene Stevens

The beef cattle industry and the pork industry, usually considered competitors, as often as not have similar interests, similar problems, similar goals. The suggested red meat-cholesterol-heart disease connection and cured versus uncured meats controversies, government regulation, pseudo-consumer representatives, nutritional labeling—all are issues facing both beef and pork producers.

That the two industries are more alike in many respects than they are different is symbolized by a man who has a working knowledge of both. A Texas native, a rancher, he is a man whose roots lie in the beef cattle industry. He spent 16 years at the helm of a large beef breed association and recently moved to a position in the pork industry. He is Orville K. Sweet, executive vice president of National Pork Producers Council (NPPC), Des Moines, Iowa. And in a recent interview he offers, from his unique vantage point, some thoughts about the red meat industry.

Although the industry is facing a lot of problems, Sweet feels there is no real crisis. But . . .

He thinks it is high time the livestock industry becomes active; it has taken a

passive role long enough. "Historically," he says, "the industry has waited for someone to throw stones, then it has reacted. We have overlooked the fact that in most instances congress wants help. One of the failings of livestock people is that they usually wait until laws are written, then they fight them. We need to get in and help write more laws.

"The industry must be more aggressive. It must promote its products with sound nutritional information. And it must present facts to the public in a positive way." He gave as an example something NPPC is doing—gathering information on the nutritional composition of its product, using that information to reason with consumers against those who are distorting the nutritional facts.

And speaking of distorting facts—what about the perpetuation of the unfounded belief associating red meat with heart disease?

Sweet feels that there is a subtle intent on the part of some who assume to be consumer representatives to discredit the red meat industry. But he thinks this is a fad and that the fad has reached its peak. The

country is swinging back to conservatism and realism, and this in itself will help discredit a movement against red meat. And he thinks red meat adversaries have had no real effect on the industry yet.

## Next—Nutritional Labeling

The next big thing in Washington that will affect the industry, according to Sweet, is nutritional labeling, a result of USDA's belief that people are concerned with food's nutritional value. He points out, though, that research has shown people are not necessarily interested in the nutritional value of foods, because they seem to choose foods for their immediate effects, not with an eye for longevity. Women, more often than not, are interested in a trim figure; men are interested in achievement, performance.

So why is the USDA involving itself in labeling? Sweet thinks the interest is due to a liberal trend in the department, to a few "super beings" there who want to plan everyone's life.

Sweet doesn't argue the importance of educating people about food and nutrition—he thinks it is essential. But then, he feels, people should be left to make their

## NITRITES

One of the problems facing both the red meat industry generally and the pork industry in particular is cured versus uncured meats, with the use of nitrites in curing at the center of the controversy.

It should be understood that nitrites traditionally have not been added to meats as a whim. They guard against botulism toxin formation, rendering foods safe to eat even if those foods have spent a day in a lunch box or an afternoon on a picnic table. For centuries, nitrites have been highly effective in inhibiting the growth of botulism in cured meats.

A year ago last August, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Carol Foreman and FDA Commissioner Donald Kennedy (who has since left that post) announced that a study conducted by Dr. Paul Newberne, MIT, revealed nitrites to

be carcinogenic, a conclusion drawn after massive doses of nitrites were administered to a cancer-prone strain of rats. As a result, it was announced that nitrites would either be banned or phased out, an announcement that precipitated headlines and congressional hearings.

In the meantime, the scientific community protested the validity of the Newberne study, and members of congress charged that FDA and USDA had based their action on limited unverified evidence and unproven test results. As a result of this pressure, FDA did engage another scientific group to review the Newberne study. However, while verification of the study was pending, the crusade against nitrites was not cancelled—or even suspended.

Subsequently, the Newberne study has been discredited; its findings were simply not valid. The whole incident

could be shrugged off as much ado about nothing—except, as the following excerpt from a letter (made especially significant because it was signed by 11 congressmen and addressed to Secretary of Agriculture Bergland and Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Harris) indicates, the "nitrite incident" probably had some regrettable effects: "We urge you to promptly establish written rules acceptable to the broad scientific community to strengthen the scientific review process and prevent regulatory fiascos of this kind in the future. It is hoped that such corrective action will restore our citizens' confidence in our agricultural producers, our scientific institutions and our food industries, and eliminate the adversarial condition between consumers and these groups which has been created by the manner in which the nitrite issue has been handled."

own food choices. The government has no business telling individuals what to eat.

And that leads to another area of concern—for cattlemen, pork producers and Orville Sweet—government intervention. Sweet agrees with the man who said he wanted three things from his government: It should deliver the mail. It should keep the enemy off our shores. And then it should get out of our lives.

### How to Accomplish No. 3

And Sweet feels there are some things the livestock industry can do to accomplish No. 3. First, he feels, this is where good strong commodity organizations come into play. The industry has to become involved

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in the Washington scene through these organizations, not to encourage the formation of new laws but to insure that lawmakers are accountable for those laws already in existence. The industry needs to monitor regulatory agencies, eliminate outdated laws.

Sweet points out that money is essential in government watch-dogging as well as in education promotion, and that the pork producers' 12-year-old checkoff program (similar to the beef industry's Beef referendum) has been quite successful. And he is optimistic that the beef industry's program will pass.

Sweet feels that the red meat industry should not be segmented—that the segments should exist, of course, to identify the various enterprises but that those segments should enhance one another, should work together. And he points out

that steps already are being taken in that direction, using as an example the Red Meat Advisory Committee, a group comprised of both pork and beef industry spokesmen working to promote red meat with sound nutritional information.

### Defensive Too Long

And he returns to his original premise: "We have been defensive too long and we have taken too long to get our act together. We have been too slow in prodding congress, too slow in making regulatory agencies accountable.

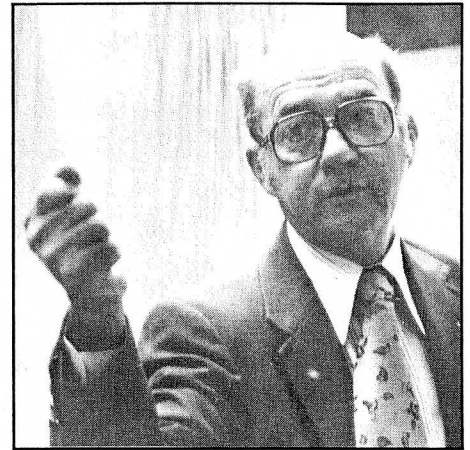
"The big problem in the cattle industry is that for too long we've known too much that wasn't so. We've made assumptions, relied on cliches. The cattle industry has image, charisma, spirit, history, but it doesn't have enough involvement from the grass roots."

And Sweet adds another thought. "In Washington there is tremendous growth in the regulatory area, but none of those people produce anything. They don't produce food or fiber. They do, however, continue to considerably increase the cost of government, and the producer is footing the bill."

Sweet says, however, that we are in a better position than we were a few years ago. "We're developing expertise in production and management, where pseudo-consumer representatives have been spending time developing expertise in guerrilla political warfare. We have been producing food and fiber, but we are now beginning to play the activist role before others do to protect our interests."

### Industry Organizations

He points out that we have such organizations as the National Live Stock and Meat Board, National Academy of Sciences, Council for Agricultural Sciences and Technology, Inc., (CAST) National Cattlemen's Assn., National Pork Producers Council—some highly professional people gathering data, interested in the welfare of



the red meat industry. And within the bureaucracy itself, he points out, we have the Animal Research Service and the Science and Education Assn. along with land grant colleges. Outside researchers have become involved: Dr. George Mann of Vanderbilt University is one of several. And there are men in government who are champions of the industry—Sweet names William Wampler of Virginia, James Martin of South Carolina, John Culver, Roger Jepsen and Charles Grassley of Iowa.

And we have individuals. According to Sweet, the individual producer should work through commodity groups and make sure his or her own congressman is accountable. "People have to be reminded how congressmen get to Washington and how easy it is to get them out if they aren't accountable to their constituents. Congress must become more active in monitoring the regulatory agencies to encourage them to maintain a reasonable stance. The important thing for people to realize today is that what we call politics is the reality of life. Every person is affected. And to borrow a quote, one can no more ignore the fact of politics in life than a drowning man can ignore water." □

## LABELING

The nitrite question has given rise to a second related problem, a new law governing labeling of cured and uncured meats. And because it feels the effects of the new law could be so disastrous, the National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) is suing USDA. (This is the first time NPPC has sued anyone, let alone the government.)

Why is the new labeling law precipitating such action?

Well, under previous federal rules, uncured look-alike products could not use the same name as the old familiar cured pork products, and there was little danger of confusing the two. Under the new law, however, common traditional names can be used on uncured meat products. The catch is that uncured products, if not properly cared for, can easily develop botulism toxins, something

nitrites prevent in cured products.

Take hot dogs, for example. (And last year Americans did—to the tune of 1.5 billion lb. or 70 franks per person.) Under the new labeling regulations, products similar in every respect to the traditional hot dog (but not cured) can be sold under the same name. A small label simply will warn the consumer that he or she has purchased an uncured item that must be handled as carefully as fresh meat.

The problem is, though, people don't read labels as a rule, or at least that's what research has indicated. (And NPPC's Orville Sweet feels that labeling is simply a conscience-clearing device anyway.) So what happens when Jane Doe picks up a package of uncured hot dogs? She has no reason to suspect they are any different from the others she has purchased. But this package is different. A day at a picnic or in a lunch box is suf-

ficient time for the uncured product to develop botulism toxin.

Complicating matters even further, unlike uncooked fresh meat that will look or smell bad before it actually is bad, those uncured hot dogs will not have any built-in warning devices. The micro-organisms that trigger familiar warning signals will have been destroyed when the uncured hot dogs were precooked. The uncured hot dog will not look or smell or taste bad. But without proper handling, it can be bad.

Botulism can make a person awfully sick. In about one out of three or four cases, it kills. NPPC is afraid the consumer, thanks to the new labeling law, is going to be misled into thinking an uncured product can be handled the same as a cured product. And NPPC doesn't want people to get sick, to die, simply because someone didn't read the fine print.