



# Taking Action in Animal Agriculture

Organization encourages ag professionals to take an active role in consumer communication.

Story & photos by **Shelby Mettlen**, assistant editor

**T**he Animal Agriculture Alliance recently hosted its 16th annual Stakeholders Summit May 3-4 in Kansas City, Mo. The nonprofit, Arlington, Va.-based organization focuses its efforts on helping bridge the communication gap between farm and fork, says president and CEO Kay Johnson Smith.

“Our goal really is to connect, engage and protect animal agriculture,” Johnson Smith says. The event’s top priority is to bring together stakeholders across all segments of animal agriculture to discuss hot topics and challenges facing the industry.

“We want to hear directly from [consumers] so that we know better how to interact with them,” she says.

This year, the Alliance is asking participants to take what Johnson Smith calls “action pledges.”

“We don’t want to bring people together to just talk, we want to generate ideas and give examples of how they can take action in their local communities,” she says.

To do that, she’s asking attendees to take to social media, adding that the No. 1 place consumers get their information is from Facebook.

“People don’t want to be educated,” she says. “They want to engage; they want to have a conversation.”

Johnson Smith adds that consumers “love” farmers and ranchers, “they just don’t know them.”

“Farmers and ranchers have a great story to tell,” she adds. “Everyone likes to eat.”

Johnson Smith encourages beef producers to know the issues and concerns of consumers.

“Antibiotics and hormones, and the

procedures that are used in the long run for care are top of mind,” she says.

Talk to your consumers to help get information out about why you do what you do on your farm, she said.

## Engage

“Attending the Animal Ag Alliance gives you fuel,” says Annette Sweeney, farmer, cattlemaster and lifelong agriculture advocate from Alden, Iowa. The former Iowa state representative and Angus breeder says the event gives participants “fuel” to step out of their comfort zones.

“This gives us a fantastic platform on which to formulate opinions and ideas,” she says, encouraging farmers and ranchers to talk to their families, consumers and legislators about what’s going on on their operations.

“Step out of that comfort zone because a lot of times we assume,” she says.

“When you assume certain facts, people don’t get conveyed the right facts. Here, you’re fueling up for the right facts, to be able to visit with other people about facts that are happening in our livestock industry.”

Sweeney encourages producers and agricultural professionals to find reasons to engage and converse with consumers.

“We need to make sure people convey

that message on what a great job we’re doing to take care of our animals,” she says. “We’re trying, and we’re doing a very good job in the livestock industry.”

## Work together

After retiring from a career with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Steve Solomon has been taking his extensive knowledge as a medical doctor and professional in infectious diseases and preventative medicine to educate organizations and individuals as a principal for Global Public Health Consulting LLC.

“This is a very real problem,” Solomon says of antimicrobial resistance. “We do need to be concerned. It’s something that has been coming for a long time.”

The chain of causation is more complicated than researchers anticipated, he says.

“What we do know is we all need to think differently about the way we use antibiotics,” he says, “but what we don’t know is what are the major factors leading to the antibiotics causing infection in people. The key is for all of us to work together.”

Solomon says he’s been “impressed” by the openness of agricultural professionals and veterinarians, and their willingness to work with human medical professionals.

Antibiotics are always going to be used in veterinary medicine, he points out. “Vets should be using antibiotics to treat sick



► **Annette Sweeney**, farmer, cattlemaster and lifelong agriculture advocate from Alden, Iowa, encourages producers and agricultural professionals to find reasons to engage and converse with consumers.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 100

## Taking Action in Animal Agriculture CONTINUED FROM PAGE 99

animals. It's good for public health to have healthy animals."

The question he says we should all be asking ourselves is: "How can we do things a little bit better?"

Solomon says the veterinary feed directive (VFD) will benefit the industry in its role of making the veterinarian something of a "gatekeeper." Similar to doctors who are responsible for prescribing antibiotics only when appropriate, and are discouraging demands from parents asking for antibiotics for their children when they don't necessarily need them, the VFD will require the veterinarian to have more involvement in administration of antibiotics, encouraging

communication, understanding and more judicious use of antibiotics in the future.

### Sustainability as a priority


"When we look at sustainability, we have to look at it holistically," says Dan Thomson, Jones professor of production medicine at Kansas State University. "Everybody has a responsibility."

"We have to look at [a] healthy planet, healthy people, healthy animals, and then we have to look at income coming back from doing these types of practices, and the cost of doing them," he continues.

Sustainability to the beef industry is looking at input costs as it relates to profit,

he explains. "If we don't have profitability, we don't have sustainability."

Genetics play a significant role in sustainability and adaptability, he points out. Producers should use the advancements in genetics as an opportunity to improve their herds and management.

"Think of sustainability this way," he says. "If you like your situation, you want to sustain it. It's really hard for a person who is in an impoverished country to worry about sustaining their current situation; they just want to eat. We want to sustain this good life and keep our good fortune. To the cattle industry, it's what will sustain your operation for the next 100 years." 

## Beef's big surprise

Berkeley, Calif., native and New York City-based journalist Nina Teicholz is not your typical advocate for the beef industry. She's quick to point out that she's led by science, but she isn't doing cattlemen any harm with her book, *The Big Fat Surprise*.

A little more than a decade ago, Teicholz was penning a series of investigative articles for *Gourmet* magazine when the subject of dietary fat caught her attention.

"I just realized there was a huge topic here about how we seem to have gotten it wrong on all dietary fat," she explains, "which is what Americans obsess about most, right? Good fat, bad fat, what kind of fat to eat, nonfat; and I took a really deep dive into the science."

In 2014, she published *The Big Fat Surprise*, which she admits "is what I never would have imagined when I started out."

After 20 years as a practicing vegetarian, the born-again carnivore slapped a slab of ribs on the cover of her *New York Times* bestseller.

### Science reveals the truth

"I was really led by the science," she asserts. Teicholz read thousands of scientific studies working to answer the question of "What kind of fat is good for you?"

Saturated fat and cholesterol have been the "pillars of our dietary guidance for 60 years," she says. She set out to discover if there was truth in the theory.

"I kept finding these extraordinary, surprising things, like studies that claimed to say something, but didn't actually say them," she explains. "Actually, even worse than that, studies that had been buried and their results had been suppressed."

On her journey for scientific truth, led by the mounting evidence that saturated fat and cholesterol were in fact not as evil as we'd been led to believe, Teicholz spoke with hundreds of top nutrition experts.

"At the end of this, I realized this fundamental idea that saturated fat and cholesterol cause heart disease could not be supported by the evidence," she says. "That was an investigative journey. It showed me that these foods that we have been avoiding, that I had been avoiding — meat, butter and cheese — that they had been unfairly convicted on the basis of their saturated fat and cholesterol content, and there's really no reason not to eat those foods."

Teicholz called society's belief that these foods make us "sick and unhealthy," a "lie we've been laboring under for more than half a century."

Teicholz admits allowing red meat back into her life was a slow process, but the health benefits and nutrients not available in other animal proteins like chicken, made it a worthwhile change.

"I had not eaten red meat for more than 20 years," she explains. "Little by little, I realized that not only was I not eating it for, really, no good reason, namely its saturated fat and cholesterol content, but that I was missing out on all these important nutrients that really are only [available] in red meat."

She admits the first time she cooked beef, it felt like "something of a heretical act," she recalls.

"I grew up in Berkeley, California; I live in New York City — two of the vegetarian capitals of the world. But it was delicious," she says. "I now eat red meat pretty much every day of the week."

The cattle industry was new to Teicholz. She'd never met a cattleman until after her book was published, when a curious industry member approached her, suspicious of her intentions.

"He couldn't believe a New York journalist would write a book like this," Teicholz says. "Shortly thereafter, I was giving a speech to a group of men in cowboy hats."

Defending her interest in the science and what's truly good for human nutrition and health, the journalist admits she has sympathy and admiration for cattle producers.

From her decades-long investigation, Teicholz concludes that the dietary guidelines need work. The science does not support the idea that beef and other animal products are bad for anyone, she says. "You produce a healthy, good product."

"How do we get this idea that saturated fat and cholesterol are bad for health? What does

the science say today?" she asks. "The reality is that the science never supported the dietary guidelines, telling us to cut back on saturated fat and cholesterol. The science never supported that. Why can't we back out of these guidelines? If they're not supported by the science, why do we still have them? Why do we still eat this way? Why do most doctors still believe this is the way we should eat? The reality is that what we believe about nutrition is mainly determined not by science, but by politics — unfortunately."

For more information on Teicholz's book and other pieces by her, visit [www.thebigfatstake.com](http://www.thebigfatstake.com).



► On her journey for scientific truth, led by the mounting evidence that saturated fat and cholesterol were in fact not as evil as we'd been led to believe, Nina Teicholz spoke with hundreds of top nutrition experts.