

✓ animal specialist
✓ nutritionist
✓ veterinarian
✓ recordkeeper
✓ agronomist
+ advocate
+ spokesperson

Add New Tasks to Your Regular Routine

Customers want to know about cattle and their caregivers.

by Barb Baylor Anderson, field editor

Angus producers already wear multiple hats — animal specialist, nutritionist, veterinarian, recordkeeper, agronomist and more. Now it's time to add advocate and spokesperson to the list. With pressure increasing from consumers to learn more about their food supply, beef producers must not only speak honestly about what happens on farms and ranches, but do it regularly.

"We really need to add speaking out to our list of farm chores; to promote all safe and healthy food," says Diane Karr, who lives

and farms in Blue Hill, Neb. She and her husband, Mike, raise corn, soybeans, wheat, alfalfa and grain sorghum and manage a 90-head commercial Angus-cross herd. "This has become personal. It is important for us to realize that we will have to share more and more details about our operations as consumers are removed from the farm."

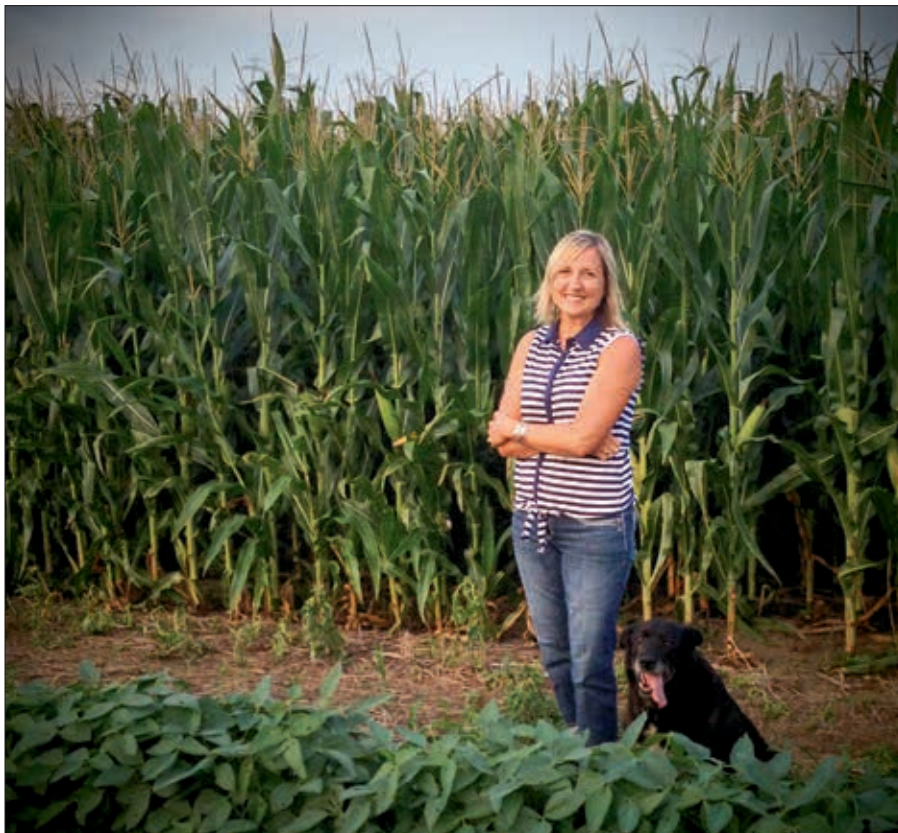
The Karrs are sixth-generation farmers, who focus on water and soil conservation and technology to improve the efficiency of their operation. Their herd calves in

February and March. Pairs are sent to pasture May-October before grazing on cornstalks at season's end. In addition to 320 acres of pasture, they currently have 80 acres of irrigated grass pasture they are evaluating for more constant nutrient availability for cow-calf pairs vs. regular pasture, since the climate is prone to drought. They background calves for two months prior to market.

In addition to farming, Karr volunteers for CommonGround, a group of female farmers created through the corn and soybean checkoff boards, to share details about agriculture with consumers.

"I am passionate about talking to consumers about what we do," she says. "Even in the middle of rural Nebraska, I run into people frequently who have questions about food production."

► **Below:** "I am passionate about talking to consumers about what we do," says Diane Karr. "Even in the middle of rural Nebraska, I run into people frequently who have questions about food production."



Share the caregivers' perspective

Joan Ruskamp has found the same to be true. She and her husband, Steve, finish cattle and grow corn, soybeans and alfalfa near Dodge, Neb. They buy and finish 600- to 700-pound (lb.) feeders, marketing about 5,000 head per year to a nearby Cargill facility.

Ruskamp's primary responsibility is animal care. She has a veterinary technician degree, and also volunteers for CommonGround to talk about animal welfare, antibiotics and hormone use. She was in Saint Louis, Mo., earlier this year to talk with grocery store customers at Straub's Fine Grocers. Shoppers had the opportunity to ask Ruskamp and two other U.S. women farmers their top food and farming questions, including questions about food safety, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and family farms.

"Consumers were surprised we were all women. They expected to see men," she says. "I was pleased many of the shoppers talked

Farmers find CommonGround

CommonGround is a volunteer group for female farmers who have conversations about the food they grow and how they produce it. They share personal experiences, science and research to help consumers sort through the myths and misinformation surrounding food and farming.

The goal is to help consumers enjoy their food without fear. The CommonGround website, <http://findourcommonground.com/>, is a resource for consumers to get more information about hot topics in agriculture, including antibiotics, food prices, animal welfare, hormones, local/organic options, food safety, corporate vs. family farms, sustainability and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

CommonGround is always open to women farmers who would like to join the movement. Check the website or social media on Facebook or Twitter to learn more and get involved.

▶ “Consumers are everything to our business. We have to provide the information and the products they want to be successful,” says Joan Ruskamp.



about how they love the taste and flavor of beef, so I focused on health, and how much protein they get from a 130-calorie portion. When consumers equate low calories with beef's nutritional value, it is a strong alternative to plant protein.”

Ruskamp first heard about the CommonGround movement at the time the *Food Inc.* movie was released. She was disappointed in the media for promoting so many inaccuracies.

“Most Americans are two to three generations removed from the farm. Because of this growing gap, moms have more questions than ever about how the food they feed their families is raised,” she says. “I want to tell my own story and share my own experiences.”

From consumer to cattle producer

Kate Lambert is one of those consumers who used to be removed from the farm. Raised about 65 miles from downtown Chicago, the CommonGround volunteer from Laclede, Mo., married a farmer and now raises Red Angus cattle, sheep, corn and soybeans. She also is a farm appraiser.

“I was an FFA member because I loved working with animals. I never dreamed I would end up on a large farm with my husband, Matt,” she says. “But as a mother and with my suburban background, I understand the pressure all moms feel regarding nutritional choices for our kids.”

Kate and Matt joined the family farm in north-central Missouri, adding the cattle as another income stream. They bought commercial cows and now have transitioned into owning 80 purebred cows and purebred sheep. They manage fall and spring calves.

Heifers are backgrounded and sold locally, while steers are sent to feedlots.

“I was frustrated by the inaccuracies of animal care and GMO information out there. I wanted to be a resource to tell the right story,” says Lambert. “I blog and volunteer for CommonGround because I can address the controversies surrounding food production. I understand that moms want to hear from an honest and trustworthy source, so I try to be that.”

Karr and Ruskamp share that philosophy. “Consumers are everything to our business. We have to provide the information and the products they want to be successful,” says Ruskamp.



Editor's Note: A former National Junior Angus Board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelancer from Edwardsville, Ill.



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Talk turkey

CommonGround volunteers offer tips for other cattle producers to talk with consumers.

- ▶ Break the ice with consumers by asking what they do and talking about what you do. If they are interested in more conversation, share more details. Encourage them to share the information with friends. You never know what ripples you may create.
- ▶ Listen, and be open to questions. Respond honestly. Talk about how you make beef safe and wholesome without forcing any information on them.
- ▶ Use words consumers understand, not farm jargon. For example, consumers may not understand terms like heifer or calving season, but they may relate to explanations like young female cows or the time when most baby calves are born.
- ▶ Tell them specifically what you do to care for animals and how it benefits the animals. Consumers want to trust who raises their food. For example, explain how antibiotics and hormones are used by animals and broken down before they are harvested for beef.
- ▶ Be sincere and sensitive to consumer concerns. Be an expert, and be able to explain why you make the decisions you make on hormone, feed and antibiotic use.
- ▶ Think like a consumer before you post farm photos on Facebook or Twitter.
- ▶ Send them to the CommonGround website for more information. Encourage them to read peer-reviewed research. Don't be afraid to say you don't know if you don't know.