



Consumer Focus

► by *Linda Robbins*, assistant editor

Beef + Transparency = Trust

Seminar offers thought-provoking day to tell the beef production story.

A rise in interest

At its core, the first-ever Beef + Transparency = Trust seminar addressed a rise in consumer concerns about the sources of their food. The event took place Oct. 3 at the Renaissance Hotel in Denver, Colo. It was hosted by the Colorado State University (CSU) Department of Animal Sciences and sponsored by the Colorado Beef Council and the Beef Checkoff Program, with support from the Colorado Dietetic Association and the Colorado Chef's Association.

The seminar aimed to raise awareness and answer questions regarding beef production, sustainability concerns and humane handling standards as these issues relate to beef quality and consumer expectations. Attendees and food writers, chefs and dietitians enjoyed lunchtime beef pairings while Dale Woerner, an assistant professor with CSU's Center for Meat Safety and Quality, answered questions and provided insights about the connections between contemporary beef production practices and dining experiences.

"We want any and all questions," said Woerner. "Then we hope people will pick out those 'aha' moments and share them with their readers, listeners, customers and clients."

The event brought together some of the country's leading researchers, feedlot operators, veterinary medicine and animal handling advocates to promote discussion and ground-level understanding about U.S. beef production. The sponsors hoped that sharing what has to happen up to 18 months before a consumer considers a steak or a hamburger would improve transparency and show how farmers and ranchers produce beef.

Real world

In addition to hearing the stories of family farmers and ranchers who raise cattle, and getting insight and facts from scientists and researchers who concentrate on animal health and well-being, attendees heard from Temple Grandin, world-renowned designer of livestock-handling facilities and a professor of animal science at CSU. She presented the American Meat Institute (AMI) video, *The*

Glass Walls Project, which showed the entire process at a cattle slaughter plant because, Grandin said, "We need to show things being done right."

Grandin emphasized that there are numerous undercover videos showing things being done wrong, and she convinced AMI that the video was needed to counter the negativity and explain what happens when things are being done right. As an example, she said that leg kicking on the rail is often cited in undercover videos as suggesting that cattle are still alive after stunning. Grandin explained that the cattle were indeed dead because the brain had been destroyed, but the walking circuit for cattle is also controlled in the spine. The leg not used to hang the animal will kick, but it is a spinal reflex action and does not indicate life.

Grandin advocated video monitoring in slaughter facilities and transparency in every aspect of food animal production. She said transparency and openness in raising, feeding and processing cattle is necessary to ensure the survival of the industry. She cautioned that some common practices within the industry may have to change or be eliminated entirely due to consumer concerns, though she was optimistic that any changes would not affect overall profitability.

During a question-and-answer session, Grandin was passionate in urging everyone involved in animal agriculture to use more assertive and creative methods to tell their stories. She was adamant that, so far, the industry has not done a good enough job of getting attention from mainstream media outlets.

"The industry has done a terrible job of getting out of its own box," Grandin said, referencing the number of hits on the undercover videos posted on the Internet by Mercy for Animals compared to the very few hits for the "nice" Farmers Feed US videos.

From outsider to insider

Anne Burkholder grew up in urban West Palm Beach, Fla., and graduated from Dartmouth College with a psychology degree. In 1997, as her husband of less than a year was finishing his master's degree and

she was about to earn her undergraduate degree, they visited his family's cattle feedyard and farming operation in Cozad, Neb., with the idea of returning to put down roots and partner in the business.

Though she had no background in agriculture, Burkholder felt drawn to the feedyard, and went to work there running the feedtruck, scooping bunks and processing cattle. Now a mother of three, she owns and manages Will Feed Inc., and has made changes to position the 3,000-head feedyard to attract producers who are interested in the data and insight she can offer by tracking their calves through the yard and into the packing plant.

The feedyard has won national awards and has focused on implementing Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) standards in every aspect of the operation.

"I want to say upfront that I'm the boss lady of a CAFO (confined animal feeding operation), and I've been called a 'factory farmer' by people who don't understand what I do every day," Burkholder said.

"Handling animals is an art and a science," she added, "we acclimate every animal to walk in a straight line and be handled on foot." The cattle in the yard are worked on foot to help them be comfortable moving among the different pens and people so they will trust the people who care for them and show when they are sick. Burkholder says feedyards can be humane, and she considers the care she offers the cattle in her feedyard humane. She says they are comfortable, and comfortable animals make better beef.

Early in 2011, Burkholder started a blog titled, "Feed Yard Foodie," hoping to explain everything she does at the feedyard. She says the focus of the blog is about she and someone else having a conversation and finding common ground. She wants people, particularly urban folks who have no idea where their beef comes from, to come to her blog and read the real story of beef production, written by someone who actually gets their hands dirty.

"Transparency is really important," she said. Having created relationships with the producers who trust her with their cattle, Burkholder wants consumers to trust the beef industry and the food it produces.

