



# Through the Eyes of

More than 800 third-grade students attend an annual Farm Day hosted by the Southeast Missouri Cattlemen's Association.

*Story & photos by Jena McReil, digital editor*

**A**s cattle farmers and ranchers, it may be easy to take the little things for granted. The sights, the smells and the joy of welcoming new calves can be everyday blessings that are far too often overlooked.

With consumers, this we have in common.

Whether it's the milk in the refrigerator or the steak on the grill, those not directly involved in production agriculture may never stop to wonder how that product arrived at the grocery store or restaurant.

They may never stop to think about the little things.



► **Above:** Roger Eakins, University of Missouri Extension, is a regular volunteer at Farm Day and shares a glimpse inside how beef travels from pasture to plate.





# a Child

## 8 35 Keys to Success Consumer Relations

A cattlemen's group in southeast Missouri was quick to recognize that reality and felt an urgent need to educate their community about agriculture. Despite the industry's prominence in the region, they noticed a growing gap between local food producers and consumers.

"Back when I was in school, about every kid was somehow connected to a farm," says Larry Miller, who raises cattle near the Mississippi River. "This area has changed so much that most children do not have any connection to the farm whatsoever."

Rather than complain about consumer ignorance or apathy, the Southeast Missouri Cattlemen's Association decided to do something about it. Group members decided to take action and do their best to equip the next generation with knowledge about the nation's food supply.

### Closing the gap

They developed the idea to host Farm Day and tap into the curious nature of third-grade students. The group organized its first event in 1995, presenting a hands-on way



► The best lessons are learned while having fun — that's the mission of the Southeast Missouri Cattlemen's Farm Day. Area students enjoy interacting with the animals, farmers and their friends during the educational event.



for children to interact with agriculture and those who make their living from the land.

This past spring, more than 800 third-grade students flooded into the Flickerwood Arena in Jackson, Mo., for the 19th annual event.

"Since we are becoming two to three generations removed from agriculture, hosting Farm Day each year becomes more and more of a blessing for us," says Paul "Butch" Meier, a lifelong Angus breeder with his family at Butch's Angus. "It is so rewarding to see the children and the questions they ask."

Along with his fellow cattlemen, Meier helped launch the first Farm Day

and remains an integral part of the event each year. With each passing third-grade class, he receives a stack of colored thank-you notes from the students, sharing how much fun they had while there and what they learned.

Meier says he hopes others involved in agriculture can take this concept and reapply it to their school districts. Farm Day attracted students from 10 schools throughout the surrounding area, some traveling up to 30 minutes to attend.

### Learning environment

"I hope the students had fun when they

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came, because fun sticks in your mind forever,” says Mark Boardman, Angus cattleman and owner of Flickerwood Arena. “We try to set up an environment where students can have a good time and learn something about agriculture that stays with them.”

Among the 10 commodity presentations were experts on beef cattle production, swine, poultry, forestry, corn, soybeans, dairy cattle, beekeeping and soil protection. The students learned that cattle have four stomachs, corn and soybeans are found in a number of everyday items, and it takes many factors to sustain a honeybee hive.

Many children were thrilled to get up close to a dairy cow and get their hands dirty while learning about soil erosion. Mary Ann Ostendorf, a veteran teacher at St. Mary’s School in Cape Girardeau, Mo., has been attending Farm Day since it began and says the experience is one the students won’t soon forget.

“This hands-on is the best approach,” Ostendorf says. “It’s such a change of pace to the classroom, where you might have your smartboard and your textbook. You get them out of their seats. They need to learn about what they eat, where it comes from, how important it is to grow it.”

Just more than 100 miles south of St. Louis, Jackson, Mo., is a community filled



with a rich history in agriculture. Pastures of beef cattle graze quietly among the rolling hills, interrupted only by a corn or soybean field. Continuing farther south, the landscape quickly changes to flat bottomland that is well-suited for row crops and specialty rice production.

All of these things translate into great opportunities to engage consumers in the journey of food production.

The most eccentric speaker students heard from was beekeeper Grant Gillard. He

entertained the groups by explaining how bees not only provide them with honey, but also pollinate crops for the nation’s food supply. He says, at the dinner table, one in every three bites has been impacted by a honeybee.

“Third graders are a good audience because they are still in that inquisitive stage and are curious. How do these things grow?” Gillard says. “Food doesn’t just happen, we raise it.”

The beef cattle station was also an event



► For 19 years, the Southeast Missouri Cattlemen’s Association has been hosting Farm Day as a way for third-grade students to learn about the agriculture around them, from tractors to beekeeping, and everywhere in between. Far right, Grant Gillard explains how bees impact the food system.





highlight. Two Angus heifers were on display as students learned about beef production and the life cycle of a calf. Roger Eakins, a local University of Missouri Extension agent and volunteer, shared why one calf translates into several hundred dollars for farmers and ranchers.

Most importantly, event organizers say the students walked away with an understanding that farmers are real-life people, right in their communities, who are dedicated to providing them safe and nutritious food.

For some students, it might have been a reminder of the life they already live on the farm. For others, it was a completely new world.

Ashley Stahlman, a college student at Southeast Missouri State University, recalls having been through Farm Day as a third-grader, and has come back to serve as a volunteer for several years.

“Ag is always going to be here,” says Stahlman, who is studying for a career in agriculture. “I hope I continue to come back

and help out, and maybe I’ll be one of the vendors one day. It’s kinda cool to think about.”

Even though the children who participate in Farm Day may never be directly involved in production agriculture themselves, the goal is that when they drive by a pasture or a field of crops they will know that someone, somewhere played a role, and be thankful.

