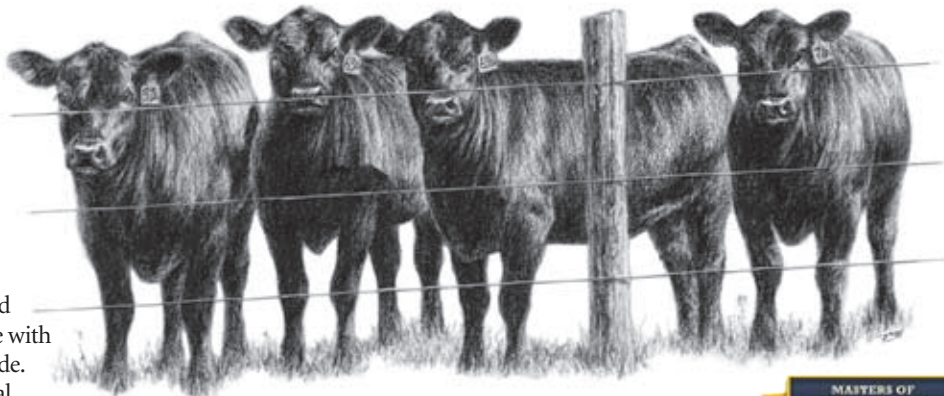


# Beef on the Front Lines

The beef industry is stepping up to thwart mistruths and misconceptions.

by *Kindra Gordon*



The livestock industry has often found itself in an increasingly intense battle with animal rights activists over the past decade. And, unfortunately, the attacks on animal agriculture often pique the attention and support of consumers.

To counter those efforts, beef producers have been encouraged to become more vocal in sharing their passion for their land and livestock with the public — and now, new efforts are gaining momentum in helping educate consumers about ag and connect producers with the public.

## Beef advocates

The Masters of Beef Advocacy program, or MBA for short, was launched by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) in winter 2008. It is designed to help beef supporters learn the facts and find just the right words to help answer beef-related questions, whether visiting with a consumer at the grocery store, speaking to an elementary class or participating on behalf of the industry in a media interview.

The program, which is funded with checkoff dollars, is a free, self-directed online training course that focuses on the

topics of beef safety, beef nutrition, animal care, environmental stewardship, modern beef production and the beef checkoff. A training session on public speaking and working with the media are held before participants can “graduate” from the program.

Daren Williams, executive director of communications with the NCBA, oversees the MBA program and reports that response to the training has been overwhelmingly positive.

Within the first several months of opening the doors on the MBA virtual classroom, 803 students had enrolled and 220 individuals completed the six online courses.

“This is well beyond my expectations for what we would achieve in the first year,” Williams says. “I believe MBA struck a chord with producers across the country who were feeling overwhelmed with the constant attacks on the industry, but didn’t feel empowered to do anything about it.”

Several participants have also joined the MBA Alumni Association, which works as a network to respond to negative information about the beef industry, particularly in the online community.

Chelsea Good, a beef advocate from Kansas, believes these efforts by MBA graduates are a great tool for combating the many misperceptions that exist about agriculture.

“The online advocacy component, in particular, is a good way for people who want to help the industry to easily get involved. I think we’d [go] a long way in improving the [perception] of agriculture in the online environment if people in the industry committed 20

minutes a couple times a week to searching for stories and blog posts about agriculture on the Internet and then post responses with their personal experiences. This is especially important as the younger generations get the majority of their information from the Internet,” Good points out.

Williams believes the MBA program will have a lasting beneficial effect on the beef industry. “MBA students are already hard at work reclaiming our legacy as the original stewards of the land and genuine caretakers

of animals. As they share their stories, they are reconnecting consumers with the people who produce their food. The impact on the beef industry will be felt one consumer at a time when they visit their local grocery store or favorite restaurant and choose beef because they feel good about supporting the farmers and ranchers who produce it,” he concludes.



## Tapping our youth

The National Beef Ambassador Program is also making inroads toward the effort of reaching consumers — especially youth. Annually, a national competition is held each fall for high school and college age youth to compete for scholarships and a spot on the five-member National Beef Ambassador Team.

During their year of service, the team of Beef Ambassadors travels to various events — from state fairs to the Boston Marathon — with the goal of educating consumers and youth about beef nutrition, food safety and stewardship practices of the beef industry.

Jessica Sampson, a sophomore at the University of California–Davis this fall, is a member of the 2009 National Beef Ambassador Team.

Of her experiences this year, Sampson says, “I have become much more familiar with the beef industry, and also with consumer concerns and questions.” One memorable moment for Sampson occurred during the Cattle Industry Annual Convention in Phoenix, Ariz., in January 2009. A PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) demonstrator was protesting outside the convention center, and Sampson was asked to be on hand at the site with a rancher to serve as spokesperson for

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the beef industry if any reporters came to cover the demonstration.

"While I was waiting for this potential interview, it hit me that this is real," Sampson says. "No filters, no pat-on-the-back story for the industry; people could be affected by this.

While I did not actually get interviewed, the realization that our Beef Ambassador Team had the power, resources and opportunities to truly do something positive for the beef industry really sunk in."

Sampson says the most important message that the beef industry needs to share is that "Ag is important to everyone's lives — whether they know it or not."

Sampson and her four teammates are also contributing to a blog (viewable at [www.beefambassador.com](http://www.beefambassador.com)) to help share positive stories about the beef industry and their ambassador efforts.

Sampson's advice to other young people in agriculture is this: "Stay in ag. Get involved, get your friends involved, and make connections with people. There are so many opportunities . . . We are the future. We will decide which road agriculture turns down. And I know we will do just fine."

The National Beef Ambassador Program was facing budget cuts that made the continuation of the program uncertain, but through support from many members in the cattle industry, the program is slated to continue. The 2010 National Beef Ambassador Competition was Oct. 9-11 in Fort Smith, Ark.

## States take action

Organizations are also being formed in several states to help create awareness for the contribution of agriculture to rural communities and state economies.

As an example, the Alliance for the Future of Agriculture in Nebraska — referred to as A-FAN for short, is a unique organization that was formed three years ago as an alliance among six commodity organizations in the state with livestock interests. Represented are the Nebraska Cattlemen, Nebraska Corn Growers Association, Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation, Nebraska Pork Producers Association, Nebraska Poultry Industries and Nebraska Soybean Association.

Roger Berry, who serves as A-FAN's field director, explains that leadership from the state's commodity groups recognized that the livestock industry was facing an increasingly challenging climate to operate in and that

a concerted effort was needed to better create awareness among the public for the important role livestock industries have in the state's economy.

Founded as a nonprofit organization, much of the funding for A-FAN comes through

checkoff dollars. This means the organization does not lobby on legislative issues, but is focused on educating the general public about the importance of agriculture.

"Our goal is to raise awareness about agriculture . . . Our mission is to ensure continued opportunity for growth of Nebraska agriculture in the future," Berry says.

Specifically, A-FAN is focused on providing information to the general public and communities about agriculture's contribution to the local and state economy and social well-being — and to combat misperceptions about agriculture. Additionally, A-FAN is available to assist livestock and poultry producers seeking to expand or diversify their operations and help them do so in ways that are compatible with the community and the environment.

Several other states have formed groups with similar goals for their states. The Coalition to Support Iowa's Farmers (CSIF) was launched in 2004; Ag United was formed a few years ago in South Dakota.

Berry believes that if agriculture is going to have a viable future in Nebraska — and other states — livestock producers must start educating the public about how they care for their land and livestock.

"Over the last 20 years, the agriculture

industry has done a terrible job of telling others about our stewardship practices," Berry says. He tells producers, "The average American today is three generations removed from the farm. Because of that separation, they don't understand what you do" — and they often don't connect ag's contribution to jobs and the economy.

"Even in towns of 400 people many people don't know what farmers and ranchers in their community do," he adds.

Thus, Berry encourages everyone in ag to start sharing the importance of agriculture with friends and family — from local communities to urban areas.

Berry says it is important for producers to relate how they "care" for livestock and the environment. "The public needs to understand we are concerned about healthy animals and producing safe food, and that we couldn't stay in business if we didn't care."

Secondly, Berry says it is important for the public to understand how a vibrant ag economy helps communities. "Ag is an important piece of the pie for economic development," he says. Specifically, Berry says the public needs to understand that ag industries help communities by providing:

- ▶ More tax base;
- ▶ More opportunities to keep the next generation on the farm;
- ▶ More opportunities to stabilize our rural populations; and
- ▶ More customers for local businesses.

In addition to educating the general public about the benefits of agriculture, Berry says A-FAN is also working to help Nebraska communities recognize the opportunities ag can offer local economies.

"We are working with communities who want to designate livestock-friendly status. This means if someone wants to expand or relocate an ag entity in the state, we can match them up with a community that is seeking new livestock development for their local economy," Berry explains.

Berry says working with communities will be critical to future success for producers. He says that, more than ever, livestock producers have to be a good neighbor and let communities know what they are doing. "Environmental responsibility is very important," he says.

Looking to the future, Berry says, "I want all of us to be activists. Activist used to be a dirty word, but you can be an activist on the other side. Ag needs to tell its story.

"Let the general public know that livestock production is very important to the well-being of your community," he concludes. "Animal ag is too important to have it taken away from us."

**"Stay in ag. Get involved, get your friends involved, and make connections with people. There are so many opportunities."**  
— Jessica Sampson

**For more information**  
Learn more about the Masters of Beef Advocacy program, or MBA for short, by contacting your state beef council or the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's (NCBA's) Daren Williams at 303-850-3346 or [MBA@beef.org](mailto:MBA@beef.org). MBA participants can take the courses on their own or participate in a class organized within their state.  
For more information or to make a donation to the National Beef Ambassador program visit [www.nationalbeefambassador.org](http://www.nationalbeefambassador.org).  
Learn more about the Alliance for the Future of Agriculture in Nebraska at [www.a-fan.org](http://www.a-fan.org); about Ag United in South Dakota at [www.agunited.org](http://www.agunited.org), and the Coalition to Support Iowa's Farmers at [www.supportiowasfarmers.org](http://www.supportiowasfarmers.org).

