

► Missouri legislature is ramping up support of the state's beef industry through five priorities: covered feeding facilities, beef research, beef processing, innovative solutions and economic impact studies, and fescue tolerance.



# State of Improvement

State legislature on board with improving beef industry opportunities.

by **Kasey Brown**, senior associate editor

It's easy to complain about the government, especially for those in agriculture. Overregulation and high taxes are often present in the news. What we don't hear regularly is when a state's legislature actually ramps up its support of agriculture. Such is the case in Missouri.

Richard Fordyce, director of the Missouri Department of Agriculture, explains that Missouri usually trades second and third place nationally in size of the cow-calf sector with Oklahoma. There are about 56,000 beef farms in Missouri, with an average size of 30-35 head. The beef industry is a large contributor to the state's economy, and he says legislative support has been building in the last few decades.

Shortly after he accepted his position 2½ years ago, Fordyce says the governor asked him where the state should exert its efforts to move agriculture forward. In the span of a 90-second conversation, he explained the importance of the cow-calf sector. The governor was on board and asked Fordyce to take a "deep dive" into the state's beef industry.

In 2013, there were approximately 1.85 million

calves born in Missouri, but only 70,000 stayed in the state through processing.

"We knew there were more opportunities to feed more cattle in Missouri, but also just to keep cattle in Missouri just a little bit longer and add some value to that really important herd we have here in the state," he notes.

After eight to nine months of preliminary research to figure out how to move the needle forward for all of the state's cattle producers — cow-calf, seedstock, commercial, backgrounders, feeders, processors — the Beef Summit Initiative was hosted Jan. 5, 2015. About 260 attendees from around the state gathered at the University of Missouri. All three sectors represented — research, cattle producers and financiers — are necessary to keep the industry moving forward.

"I'm very hopeful that we look back at Jan. 5, 2015, as the day we really got serious about raising cattle in Missouri," he says with a hopeful twinkle in his eye.

The Beef Summit was the first important step in the Missouri Beef Initiative. From that event, a steering committee was formed, composed of volunteers from each of the three groups. The steering committee has since donated a great deal of time and effort to creating the next steps in the initiative. Working with many cattle organizations and the Missouri Department of Agriculture, the committee was tasked with finding the next steps and analyzing the costs of each. Each segment of the value chain needed something to add value, explains Fordyce.





PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

### Research priorities

The first step was to determine major challenges and how to address them. From those discussions, several priorities emerged: covered feeding facilities, beef research, beef processing, innovative solutions and economic impact studies, and fescue tolerance.

One of Missouri's advantages is that there is ample forage. However, it is predominantly fescue. That leads to many cattle being fescue-endophyte tolerant. A research priority is developing a test to predict which animals are endophyte tolerant. Another aspect to speed up the test would be to make it a chuteside test, and it could be used especially for replacement females and bulls.

Another concern is bovine respiratory disease (BRD), so a research priority is to look into a DNA predictor for BRD-resistant cattle.

A big concern is quality Missouri cattle leaving the state to be fed for finishing.

Fordyce posed the question, "How do you raise more cattle in a state like Missouri that has two urban centers on each side of the state that have a great deal of concern toward what happens to the environment? So, if we're going to feed cattle, how do we do it in Missouri? We used to feed cattle in the '50s and '60s, but those animals ultimately moved more west. . . . We knew if we were going to advocate for increasing the number of cattle fed in Missouri, we had

to do it in an environmentally responsible way."

Upon further investigation, he says, covered feeding structures give more control over cattle's environment, health, feed intake, runoff and more. Having more feeding options in Missouri also helps supply small- and mid-sized processors in the state with high-quality beef.

These research priorities have secured a \$1.2 million Missouri Technology Corporation research grant, and it was broken up and awarded to a diverse distribution throughout the state to conduct the research. Additionally, there is \$1.2 million slated in the Missouri budget for beef research that would be distributed through the Missouri Agricultural Foundation, which is designed to assist ag and small businesses in rural areas across the state

in developing business and marketing plans for value-added businesses.

The Qualified Beef Tax Credit Program, administered through the Missouri Agriculture and Small Business Development Authority (MASBDA), offers an incentive for producers to add weight to cattle, but he admits there is more that the fund can do. The Missouri Department of Agriculture is working with the general assembly and governor's office to utilize that program to a greater extent.

"The Missouri Department of Agriculture and the general assembly are viewing this opportunity to engage in the beef industry to be a priority. We've got a lot of momentum. We've got a lot of friends in the general assembly, and the governor is very supportive of doing what we can. Certainly, when you have a state as diverse as Missouri, there are a lot of challenges on the budget — lots of asks,

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### Champion the good

In addition to working to improve opportunities for Missouri cattlemen, Director of the Missouri Department of Agriculture Richard Fordyce highlights a program that trumpets the good Missouri farmers and ranchers are already doing. The Missouri Agricultural Stewardship Assurance Program (ASAP) was not a direct result of the Beef Initiative, but in many ways it correlates with it. ASAP is a certification program that champions Missouri farmers and ranchers who are responsible stewards of their resources. Fordyce explains that it is meant to acknowledge and reward those who proactively protect the environment, employ sound management practices and use science-based technology to produce safe food, fuel and fiber for consumers.

Certified operations may receive increased access to national and international markets. Producers receive official verification of the farm's sustainability, including displayable proof and promotional pieces like a media kit, farm signage, news release template, and physical and digital ASAP stamp for marketing and social media materials. It also includes recognition on the ASAP website (<http://asap.farm>) and early access to educational programs.

Producers who want to become certified apply to the Missouri Department of Agriculture and a representative from the department will schedule a farm visit prior to issuing certification.

Of the six categories, two specifically target the beef industry: grassland and livestock, Fordyce points out. Sustainability is a prominent goal for all those in agriculture. Ultimately, he notes, sustainability means profitability, and the research goals aim to improve all of the above. By using the engagement from the state legislature, beef producers and multiple state ag organizations, he says that momentum comes from different angles to benefit the whole state beef industry.

This momentum, coupled with the ASAP program, benefits producers and consumers alike by talking about the good production practices in use and the research being done to continue improvement.

Fordyce explains, "Let's talk about the good things, capture those good ideas, get that research out. All of this can be done simultaneously. Producers benefit, consumers benefit, and through all of this engagement, folks outside the industry hopefully have a better understanding of things that are important to the state of Missouri and to beef producers.

"We're going to do the right things as it relates to our animals. We're going to do the right things as it relates to land. Consumers will find things we're doing pleasing. We can do all that; that's what's really cool about this," he adds. "We can do all that and be more profitable, have a better herd, provide a better product to consumers, and do things the right way. We can do all that at the same time, and that's what I get excited about."



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**— Richard Fordyce**



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lots of things that are required to be done — but the momentum that we're seeing with the work that we've done in the Missouri Department of Agriculture and that of cattle producers and other ag organizations is building.”

Fordyce adds that this funding from the state will be voted on soon, and he is hopeful that it will result in about \$5.5 million that Missouri beef producers will have access to improve the value and size of the herd within Missouri. For every 10,000 head of cattle retained, there is an additional \$6 million in value added to the Missouri economy.

“We've got some extremely capable researchers at our institutions in Missouri that have taken beef production very seriously for a long time. We are one piece of the research-funding pie that's moving this effort forward. If we can figure out how to predict how animals will react in a real-world atmosphere and improve that herd, and if we

► **Right:** The Missouri Agricultural Stewardship Assurance Program aims to acknowledge and reward those who proactively protect the environment, employ sound management practices and use science-based technology to produce safe food, fuel and fiber.



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can keep those really high-quality cattle in Missouri, we know that will pay dividends to the state,” Fordyce asserts enthusiastically.

He has a goal to secure second place and stay firmly ahead of Oklahoma in cow-calf production, but the challenge is doing more with the same amount of land. The initiative to grow the beef herd is coming at the right time, he says, because the markets are coming off of historically high grain commodity prices, so he hopes to see some cropland go back to grass. In many cases, those areas are better suited to be pastureland in the first place.

The goal of the initiative is to use the gathered momentum of agriculture support from the state to keep increasing opportunities for Missouri cattlemen.

“Missouri's effort is certainly not targeted at our neighbors. We are part of the U.S. beef industry. Anything we can do to engage with our producers and our beef segment, we think is time certainly well spent,” he concludes.

More information about the Missouri Beef Initiative can be found at <http://Agriculture.MO.Gov>.

