



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, director of producer education, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Suspending Reason

“Read not to believe or disbelieve but rather to weigh and compare,” wrote Sir Francis Bacon. Renowned for his intellect, reason and problem-solving ability, Bacon would be stunned that in our age his counsel has so often been abandoned in favor of activism, “spin doctoring,” “positioning” the message, and the other myriad of strategies that only serve to create semi-truths and outright falsehoods as truth is swept aside in the search for power and influence.

Fact or fiction?

“Spinning the facts” has become standard operating procedure for activists regardless of their ideological leaning, which only makes it more difficult to discern fact from fiction. Unfortunately, as they attempt to consolidate power, activists typically advance their own cause by demonizing skeptics, non-believers or those who simply have a different philosophy or vision. The end result is almost always simplistic solutions to complex problems, which, if implemented, have a ripple effect of negative unintended consequences.

While beyond our comprehension, the elitists and activists have chosen animal agriculture as their target for demonization. As such, those of us who make not only a living but a life from our involvement in agriculture must arm ourselves with the facts so that we can advocate for and advance our profession.

A good starting place in the discussion about food production is to define both the need and the barriers to meeting the needs. The need is clear: According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates, we must increase worldwide food production by 100% by 2050 from essentially the same agricultural land mass that is in production today. The challenge of meeting global food demand is sobering and yet provides a very clear focus. This objective must be accomplished within the context of assuring the long-term productivity of natural resources while meeting our obligation as good stewards of livestock.

As if the enormity of this challenge were not sufficient stress, agriculture finds itself in the crosshairs of the radical minority who seek to consolidate their political power come hell or high water.

The critics of agriculture tend to base their objections on merging three points — agriculture uses too much technology, has

too much environmental impact and is composed of business entities that are too big. Their solution is a nicely packaged concept characterized as locally produced, low-yield and small-acreage. Unfortunately, the facts simply don't align with this utopian panacea.

Jude Capper at Washington State University provides a logical and clear explanation of the food system in her recent article “Demystifying the Environmental Sustainability of Food Production,” from which the following summary points are derived:

- Assessment of environmental impact must be standardized and measured in impact per functional unit of food produced.
- Productivity per animal, number of animals and choice of management system are all-important measures in determining agriculture's environmental impact.
- Organic systems are less productive; for example, an organic dairy has 15%-25% lower yield per head than does a conventionally managed herd. Increased productivity per head has allowed U.S. producers to reduce total animals while increasing total food output. The carbon footprint of the dairy industry in the U.S. has been reduced by 41% during the past six decades.
- Grain-finished cattle reach heavier market weights at younger ages, which translates to a two-thirds reduction in methane per pound of gain.

Disputed claims

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) own analysis determined that the

total agricultural contribution to national greenhouse gas (GHG) emission was only 5.8% (animal agriculture accounts for 3.4%). Meanwhile, the transportation sector is responsible for 26% of GHG emission in the United States. Some suggest that by buying locally, consumers can lower their carbon footprint.

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Capper's analysis suggests such reasoning is faulty due to a failure to account for productivity differences in transportation. For example, when a consumer visits the local grocery store and buys a dozen eggs, the total distribution system will have a fuel expenditure of 0.28 gallons (gal.). However, a dozen eggs purchased at a local farmer's market would have an expenditure

of 1.53 gal. of fuel per dozen assuming that the consumer chose to drive a fuel-efficient vehicle. In both cases, the consumer's choice to drive to either the grocery store or the farmer's market accounted for more than 95% of the total fuel expended.

Frank Mitloehner, air quality scientist at the University of California-Davis (UC Davis) disputes the claim that eating less meat and milk will have a positive effect on the environment. “We certainly can reduce our greenhouse gas production, but not by consuming less meat and milk. Rather, in developed countries, we should focus on cutting our use of oil and coal for electricity, heating and vehicle fuels.”

Mitloehner, Capper, and a host of credible environmental scientists are rapidly coming to the conclusion that regulation focused on impacting the GHG contributions of agriculture will fail to positively affect the environment while most certainly assuring that the specter of hunger widens across the globe.

It is time for society to return to the age of reason.

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