



Outside the Box

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

Words matter

"Words matter!" This phrase, coupled with an absolute belief that a knowledge of Shakespearean literature was central to the life of an educated person, were the hallmark commitments of Mrs. Wallace, the emphatic and tough-minded 12th-grade English teacher at my high school. I am certain I had a minimal grasp of the wisdom she was trying to impart at the time. However, in the reality of conducting business in a world where regulators, policymakers, attorneys, media and the social elite often use words as battering rams, it is crystal clear that words, and the manner in which they are interpreted and defined, do indeed matter.

Sustainability

Sustainability is a word that seems to have captured much attention of late, and yet it seems to lack both clarity of definition and interpretation. However, it is a word much competed for as it is used in a variety of settings and under numerous contexts.

In many conversations, sustainability is coupled with words such as "natural," "organic," "slow," "local" or "green." As a result, sustainability has too often been reduced to a simple arithmetic equation whereby attainment can be achieved by subtracting or reducing one variable from the formula. For example, surely if carbon output were reduced, then sustainability must be improved. Or, food production without the use of modern technology must certainly be more sustainable.

In both cases, the underlying assumption is that less always equates to more-desirable outcomes. Unfortunately, such assumptions applied in linear decision-making will yield outcomes that ultimately fail.

In truth, sustainability has at least three dimensions — environmental, economic and social. These components overlap and interact to create a complex system that requires a multidimensional approach to management. Under this systems view, sustainability is a process of continuous improvement more reflective of a journey than an outcome. Thus, products, processes and decisions cannot be described as sustainable or unsustainable. They can, however, be viewed as more sustainable or less sustainable when measured multidimensionally.

Goals for sustainability

In a broad sense, we seek improved

sustainability on our ranch, setting the goal that our choices should contribute to the following objectives:

- Stronger community
- More productive, healthier landscape
- Profitable business capable of creating opportunities for employment
- Retaining flexibility for future generations of both producers and consumers

Adapted to a more global view, sustainability for agricultural systems must focus on the ultimate goal of providing people a diet that contributes to their quality of life and does so in a manner that is affordable, more effectively utilizes natural resources, contributes to healthy economies, and demonstrates commitment to the future.

There are those who in their quest for political power have chosen to define sustainability as a black-and-white outcome and, thus, they boil the choices down to the most simplistic — good or bad.

Equally unfortunate are the responses by for-profit organizations that have moved sustainability into the realm of marketing schemes and sound bites that only contribute to quick-fix, short-term approaches. Business leaders have tried to portray sustainability as something to be checked off the list of attributes that can be aligned with their products and services.

In the worst case, marketers use the public's confusion to portray some products or companies as more sustainable than others, thus creating an environment of conflict that will limit rather than increase opportunities for success.

These approaches will likely yield less-

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sustainable decision-making because they fail to recognize the complexity of the interactions and they lack long-term commitment to continuous improvement.

Supply chain view

Sustainability must also be viewed from a full supply chain perspective if progress is to be made. As Jude Capper of Washington State University points out, "data suggest that the amount of food currently produced is sufficient to fulfill global requirements, yet the infrastructure needed to transport it into food-deficient areas is lacking. In addition, an estimated 20%-30% of food is wasted globally. In the U.S., this amount may be as high as 40%."

Too many times, discussions about sustainability have been conducted in a narrow vacuum instead of as a conversation that recognizes the multiple dimensions of the systems in play. The narrow approach is the equivalent of making all beef cattle enterprise decisions focused on a single element, such as improving weaning weight or maximizing reproductive rate, with no regard for the consequences of these narrow choices. Truly sustainable agricultural systems require a broader perspective that weighs cost and benefit in multiple dimensions.

As the beef industry continues to invest energy and resources into the realm of sustainability, several guiding principles should be applied:

- There are no sustainable products, services or enterprises, only those that have committed to improvement in the quest to be more sustainable.
- Sustainability is not a fixed point, but a journey.
- Simple fixes applied to complex problems are not sustainable.
- Finally, tools and solutions must be based in science, objective, cost-effective and decision-focused.

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