

Playing Offense



Producers are getting in the game and ensuring a viable future for the beef industry.

by *Kindra Gordon*

As the animal welfare issue continues to be a central focus among consumers — and the news media — the advice to the beef industry has been to be proactive. Beef producers are being encouraged to reconnect with consumers and share how they care for their land and livestock, and all sectors of the industry are seeking methods to help shape a positive, viable future for beef.

And, there are success stories from these actions.

Telling beef's story

For Lucy Snyder Rechel finding ways to improve the beef industry isn't just something to which she gives lip service. It's something she's committed to making happen.

Rechel manages the family-run 4,000-head Snyder Livestock Co. feedlot near Yerington, Nev. There she custom-develops bulls and replacement heifers annually for purebred and commercial breeders from across the West.

Of her dedication to the beef industry, Rechel says, "I'm committed to our industry and the people in it. Ranchers are the best, most compassionate people in the world ... And I'm willing to do anything I can to make the industry thrive."

The beef industry has to step beyond "preserving" the industry, Rechel says. "We can't be an industry that is barely making it. This industry has got to thrive in order to be something that the next generations can come back to."

It is that passion and commitment that has propelled Rechel into being a role model who has raised the stakes — and standards — in the beef industry.

Rechel is well-known for being among the first feedlots to require testing of all incoming calves for persistent infection (PI) with the bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) virus. Her innovative thinking is also what has helped shape Snyder Livestock's annual bull test and sale during the past decade. Snyder Livestock was the first bull test in the western United States to incorporate feed efficiency into the testing data three years ago.

While Rechel may be best known for her innovative practices at the feedyard, she has also stepped forward within the industry as an active leader. She presently chairs the Nevada Beef Council and serves on the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Youth Influencers Committee. Rechel says those experiences have made her aware of the need for telling the beef industry's story.

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on us. We're defending the beef industry all the time against animal rights activists, environmental groups and even nutritionally," she says.

"Ranchers must recognize that part of their job is to step out and tell our story. Instead of being on the defense, every single rancher needs to get out there and play offense," Rechel adds. "We need to be telling others, 'This is how I take care of my animals and my land. This is why the beef industry is important and why beef is a safe, healthy product.'"

Annually Rechel hosts area kindergarteners as they tour Snyder

Livestock. This year she spent time in the classroom teaching fourth graders about the industry and then hosted the kindergartners along with the fourth graders. "It gave the fourth graders a chance to teach the younger kids what they had learned about ag through the year. It was a lot of fun," Rechel says.

"I do these things because I'm playing offense, and I encourage every single rancher to play offense, too," she concludes.

One company's commitment

Another example in the industry of playing offense can be profiled in AgriBeef, a vertically integrated beef company that includes cow-calf, feedlot, packer and branded beef entities.

Wade Small, operations manager for Snake River Cattle Feeders and AgriBeef Genetics, divisions of the Idaho-based company, says a focus on animal well-being is important to AgriBeef. "AgriBeef has always operated with animal care as a top priority. Our philosophy is what's good for animals is good for business," Small says.

Small reports that in 2003 AgriBeef was the first cattle feeding company to receive ISO 9001 and HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points) certification. "This allowed for standardization to document and track production for food safety through the system," Small explains.

In 2006, the company also received ISO14001 registration, which sets voluntary

environmental management standards. "This includes practices such as composting and reducing fuel usage . . . The focus is in trying to decrease the company's effect on the environment," Small says.

Next, AgriBeef developed an animal welfare program in 2007 with documented best management practices for animal care and employee training. In 2008, they had their first third-party audit to evaluate their animal care practices. These audits will continue to be conducted annually.

With these programs in place, AgriBeef is now looking to tie their commitment to animal care through the beef production chain to their food brands so that consumers are aware of the company's efforts, as well.

Small reports that AgriBeef is launching its "star commitment" promise. A "star" logo will be included with AgriBeef products and will represent four core principles of sustainability, animal well-being, responsibility and total quality by the company.

"We want to differentiate our brand so consumers can have confidence in AgriBeef," Small says.

Small says at this point it is unclear if there is a return on the added investment of

implementing and documenting animal care practices, but he adds, "We view this commitment to animal care as a cost of doing business. We view it as a responsibility to develop a better, safer product. We feel it is an integral part of the story AgriBeef has to tell.

"We want to benchmark our results so we can continue to improve. We really want to be proactive. We believe that the more we can do to set our own guidelines and regulations the better off we will be rather than having regulations dictated to us by the government," he adds.

A state steps up

In Colorado, it was that concern of having regulations dictated to livestock producers that prompted the state's ag leadership to take a proactive animal well-being stance in 2007.

Ivan Steinke with the Colorado Livestock Association tells that the Human Society of the United States (HSUS) was eyeing Colorado in 2007 to get a ballot initiative prohibiting confinement of farm animals in gestation stalls and veal crates. Similar initiatives had previously passed in Florida and Arizona — and the same initiative went on to be on the ballot and pass in California in 2008.

"Our livestock industry in Colorado decided to take a different path and become the aggressor versus let HSUS tell us what to do," Steinke says.

Different member organizations from the livestock industry began to meet and discuss what might be done. Steinke admits that in the beginning most producers were upset and didn't want to be told how to run their operation.

Particularly, the Colorado hog industry was going to be affected if the HSUS initiative came into the state. "We're not the largest pork-producing state, but our industry wanted to be able to stay competitive," Steinke says. The veal issue was moot at the time as there is no veal industry in Colorado.

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Using YouTube

Longtime animal handling expert Temple Grandin believes the livestock industry needs to be more proactive in sharing positive stories about beef with the public. She suggests YouTube is the tool to do just that. YouTube is an Internet site where video clips can be posted and viewed by anyone.

Grandin emphasizes that pictures speak louder than words — especially with consumers who tend to react more to emotion than science. Thus, she believes this can work in agriculture's favor by featuring clips of families who operate a ranch and obtain their livelihood from the ranch while sharing stories of their animal care efforts.

Grandin says YouTube isn't being utilized presently to tell positive beef industry stories. She encourages livestock producers to search the video clips on YouTube using words like "ranching" and "beef industry" to see what comes up. Often, it is ranches for sale or misinformed footage about the industry.

Thus, Grandin says producers need to become more proactive about posting their own video clips and information on YouTube. Grandin says many ranchers already do a great job with animal welfare practices, and they need to make 2- to 3-minute videos

giving a ranch tour to share how they care for their land and livestock.

Grandin herself has posted several animal handling videos on YouTube. View them at www.grandin.com.

The Animal Agriculture Alliance has also posted several pieces of short footage on YouTube to help educate others about agriculture. One clip in particular aims to help spread the word about farmers' and ranchers' commitment to their animals, their land and their community.

The short video points out that more than 90% of America's farms and ranches are family-owned and aims to help the public — especially youth and young adults — to better understand American farmers' and ranchers' commitment to people, animals and the environment.

The Alliance's YouTube video can be seen on its web site at www.animalagalliance.org.

Editor's note: Go to www.angus.org for links to Angus updates and videos on YouTube. Visit www.certifiedangusbeef.com/producers/index.php for rancher video profiles provided by Certified Angus Beef LLC.

But, after several discussions, the Colorado pork producers found consensus and got proactive. They voluntarily decided they would move to group housing over a 10-year phase-in. This proposal was formally put together as Senate Bill 201 for the 2008 legislative session; it also included animal confinement standards for the veal industry within the state if per chance that industry began to develop in the future in Colorado.

“We moved to an offensive role instead of being in a defensive position,” Steinke says of the Senate Bill 201 proposal. “We weren’t going to sit back and let someone manipulate us.”

Steinke adds that the most impressive thing about Senate Bill 201 was the fact that 15 different organizations signed on to a

white paper supporting the proposed bill for Colorado. “It was monumental,” he says.

Senate Bill 201 passed in Colorado’s general assembly in 2008 and was signed into law by the Governor in May 2008.

By being proactive and passing the bill, Steinke says, the livestock industry in Colorado has ensured that it is still going to have a viable pork industry for the future.

“Because the bill was written by livestock industry leaders and calls for a 10-year phase-in, it allows time for research on how to convert [to] group housing, time for training producers to make the change, and some flexibility

in implementation,” Steinke says. As well, Senate Bill 201 allowed for establishment of an advisory group to help address other animal welfare issues that may come forward.

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Steinke shares that the words of one Colorado pork producer best sums up the outcome: “This turned out as well as we could have hoped. I realize there are impacts to our industry, but compared to what I think we could have faced, I believe this at least gives us the time to prepare and make plans.”

As other states deal with similar animal well-being issues and the possibility of outside ballot initiatives being introduced, Steinke stresses that a united industry and academic support for research data and knowledgeable spokespersons are two key elements.

He adds that time is of the essence. “It doesn’t matter if you are in the pork, poultry or beef industry, you need to have industry alliances, and you need to keep looking forward to solutions instead of being reactionary,” he concludes.

