

Mixing Beans,

Illinois producer pushes to build feed and beef businesses together.

by Barb Baylor Anderson

If you ask Rob Shaffer if he is a cattle producer who raises corn and soybeans or a crop farmer with Angus cows, he just may tell you he sells insurance and produces commodities on the side.

Such tongue-in-cheek thinking has helped the El Paso, Ill., producer successfully marry his duties as secretary of the Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) and president of the Illinois Livestock Development Group (ILDG) into ways to build both businesses together in the state.

“I want to give back to agriculture,” says Shaffer about agreeing to serve in the two roles simultaneously. “I know from the soybean side that farmers have experienced good times during the last few years. I know from the livestock side that times have been more challenging.”

In serving in the dual roles, Shaffer observes that many grain producers today are a generation removed from having livestock on their farms.

“Some have forgotten the benefits of using manure for crop production, or about the jobs and taxes that the livestock industry can bring to their communities,” he says. “It is better for all of us to have livestock producers nearby. When production stays local, we all benefit. That is the message we share in Illinois.”

Shaffer graduated from Illinois State University in 1993 and went to work in the hog equipment industry in North Carolina.

“I got a taste of the regulations involved with production before they intensified,” he says. “I came back to Illinois in 1998 and went into the insurance business. I have a good understanding of the paperwork and permits that are involved with trying to grow or start a new livestock business. You have to be committed. It can be a lot of work.”

The ISA has made support for animal



PHOTOS BY TERRA SHAFER

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agriculture its No. 1 funding priority. More livestock would help boost the economy and strengthen basis levels for corn and soybean prices.

Shaffer welcomes the opportunity, noting the Illinois livestock industry has been shrinking while the industry grows nationwide. In the last 10 years, according to the ILDG, Illinois livestock receipts fell from \$2.3 billion to \$1.7 billion. During the same decade, U.S. livestock receipts increased 40% from \$70.9 billion to \$99.6 billion. ILDG’s goal is to boost incomes for all Illinois livestock and grain producers by increasing total livestock numbers on large and small farms,

improving operation efficiencies, developing new markets and facilitating new production systems.

“Every state faces unique challenges, and Illinois is no different. We face roadblocks with the business climate, lawmakers, regulators and even road commissioners and other producers,” says Shaffer. “For instance, I attended a hearing for a pork producer wanting to expand his operation. He was trying to do everything right, and his biggest opposition was his farming neighbors.”

To try and resolve the state’s challenges facing livestock production expansion, representatives from various Illinois commodity groups meet quarterly to discuss problems. Shaffer says the meetings have increased dialogue and identified areas where corn and soybean farmers, for example, can help fund research and activities that benefit beef and pork producers.

Shaffer notes that similar work is taking place in South Dakota. Governor Dennis Daugaard hosted early this summer an “ag development summit.” The summit brought together leaders from several organizations to identify top ag development priorities. No. 2 on the list is increasing livestock production.

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Beef

“Being on both boards has personally opened my eyes. Soybean farmers can look for markets internationally, but we also can sell grain out our back doors to livestock producers or even raise livestock ourselves,” he says. “When we raise beef in Illinois and ship it around the world, the added economic value stays in Illinois and in the U.S. More producers need to become accustomed to understanding that our customers are not grain elevators.”

Value-added operation

Shaffer carries those thoughts into his own operation. Rob and his brother, Emory, are fourth-generation farmers. Rob and wife Jennifer have two sons, Bobby and Jacob, who together with Emory's children, Rachel and Luke, represent the fifth generation. Emory's wife, Terra, grew up on a farm that has been in her family since 1836. That is where the brothers raise Angus cattle.

“We always make the offer to people to join us on the farm and learn about how we raise their food. We want them to bring their kids and look over how we do things,” he says. “We explain how we raise our animals, show them the feedstuffs we use, and let them know we feed the same beef to our families.”

The Shaffers raise hormone-free, grain-fed Angus beef for the local freezer market. They live close to Bloomington, Ill., which has allowed them to generate customers via word of mouth. Many are repeat customers. The Shaffers usually have a waiting list for freezer beef.

“We started out with a few feeder steers and got interested in mama cows,” he says. “When my brother married, we had access to potential pasture ground as long as we rebuilt the fences. We also connected with several local Angus producers to trade labor for equipment and learn the business. Our genetics come from Brent Henkel at Henkel Family Farms/Rundles Angus. We have worked closely with Jason Lindbom from Lexington, Ill., and president of the Central Illinois Angus Association, and Butch Boitnott.”

The Shaffers have 10 cows and two bulls. While they use natural-service breeding almost exclusively, they are trying artificial insemination (AI) and hope to expand their cow base as pasture becomes available.



Livestock production a local economic engine

The Illinois Livestock Development Group (ILDG) commissions Peter Goldsmith, associate professor of agribusiness management and director of the University of Illinois Food and Agribusiness Management Program, to periodically analyze the economic contribution from the state's animal agriculture industry.

The study, last updated in December 2011, finds, “The production sector of the Illinois livestock industry contributes \$3.5 billion of total impact and more than 25,000 jobs to the state's economy. When combined with meat and dairy processing, the entire complex produces more than \$27 billion of total impact, equal to 5% of the state's economy and 99,000 jobs. This number has increased by about \$6 billion from the 2004 study. The industry continues to serve as an economic engine in both rural and urban areas of the state.”



► Rob and Jennifer's two sons, Bobby and Jacob, represent the fifth generation on the farm.