



Jump-Starting Beef's Next Generation

New program bolsters optimism and opportunities.

by *Kindra Gordon*

It's a statistic that does not bode well for the cattle sector: The average age of beef producers in the United States is 58 years old — with 32% of producers being 65 or older. It means there are few young people who choose to stake a career — or find

opportunities — in raising cattle.

That is an ongoing concern with many implications — fewer families in rural communities, landscapes managed by more absentee owners, fewer individuals to serve in industry organizations and to represent

agriculture on local, state and national levels, and less expansion in the cattle sector to keep pace with the projected population growth over the next decade, to name a few.

But new programs are emerging to help reverse that trend and help young people

Additional programs

South Dakota is also aiming to foster the success of beginning beef producers through a new program funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) called “beefSD.”

The three-year program was launched in early 2011 and will train 30 aspiring South Dakota beef producers in the areas of livestock production; natural resource stewardship; marketing; and business, financial and risk management. Program participants each have less than 10 years of experience during their adult life in beef production.

The program is being administered by the Cooperative Extension Service at South Dakota State University (SDSU) in partnership with the South Dakota Farm Bureau Federation through a \$748,892 USDA grant. SDSU Extension beef specialists Kenneth Olson and Julie Walker, who are both based at the West River Ag Center in Rapid City, are serving as project directors for the program, with Stacy Hadrick serving as coordinator. Lowell Mesman with the South Dakota Farm Bureau Federation is also a project partner.

“The beefSD program will focus not only on developing beginning beef producers’ management skills but also their leadership skills,” says Hadrick. To do so, numerous extension specialists and educators, along with experienced South Dakota ranchers and ag professionals, will be involved in sharing their expertise with participants.

The goals of beefSD are to provide participants the opportunity to evaluate alternative beef cattle production systems, learn about the entire U.S. beef cattle industry, and initiate individual cattle enterprise plans to guide decision-making on their own operations in the future. Mentoring will be provided from experienced beef producers and ag professionals to help create a network through which these beginning producers can seek advice for years to come.

“We hope beefSD will help beginning producers develop a



with an interest in cattle pursue their dreams. One such example is the Beef Leaders Program at South Dakota State University (SDSU).

The new program was launched in the fall of 2009 by the SDSU Animal and Range Sciences Department, with animal science professor Kelly Bruns and assistant professor Sara Winterholler overseeing the effort.

They explain that with today's beef industry facing increasing changes in environmental, welfare and global trade issues, along with high production costs and competition for resources, the Beef Leaders

Program was developed to complement the conventional classroom curriculum and help students gain a better understanding of the beef industry.

Bruns points out that undergraduate students at SDSU have expressed a strong interest in returning to a family farm or ranch and being involved in the beef industry. Surveys of freshmen in the University's Animal and Range Science Department have repeatedly indicated that greater than 50% were primarily interested in beef cattle production. And of these, three-fourths of them hope to return to the family farm or ranch and be part of the rural community.

SDSU Animal and Range Science faculty are hopeful that through the knowledge, leadership and networking skills gained in the Beef Leaders Program, students will see the career opportunities available in the beef industry, as well as be inspired to serve as industry leaders in producer, commodity and legislative entities in the future.

Real-world program

SDSU's innovative program offers students the opportunity to participate in:

- a monthly lectureship series during the school year featuring nationally recognized beef industry speakers addressing current topics — from animal welfare concerns to nutrition and genetics;
- group projects addressing industry issues, and then developing educational materials to help educate the public about that topic;
- industry tours and state and national beef industry meetings, including visits to the state capital and attendance at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) annual meeting.

Michaela Braesch, a senior animal science major from Herman, Neb., says of her involvement in the Beef Leaders Program, "I have enjoyed the opportunity to meet many people and experience the different aspects of the beef industry by touring cow-calf

operations, feedlots and a beef processing plant. This has enabled me to appreciate the industry as whole and will allow me to have a better understanding in the future."

Additionally, Braesch, who intends to be involved with her family's cow-calf operation after she graduates, believes the experience has made her a better spokesperson for the industry, saying, "I believe that by participating in this program, I can help bring awareness to consumers about beef. I can educate consumers about our management practices and assure them that they are consuming a safe, nutritious product."

Likewise, Danielle Schubert, a junior animal science/ag business student from Brainerd, Minn., says, "The beef industry is the basis for my family's livelihood, and I want to do my part to help strengthen the industry's future. I enjoy being a part of a group where every individual is as passionate about the beef industry and as interested in advocating for it as I am."

This summer, a new "internship" facet of the Beef Leaders Program will be launched. It will provide the opportunity for one or two students to be selected for a 10-week summer internship that gives insight on the different sectors of the beef industry, producer organizations and governmental policy, including a visit to the nation's capital.

As SDSU students who have participated in the program graduate, Winterholler says they hope the Beef Leaders experience has given them a jump-start on their future.

"The value of the Beef Leaders Program is industry exposure and the opportunity for students to develop lifelong working relationships with a group of peers that share a passion for the beef industry. We hope this industry network will be a valuable resource for students to utilize as they work through beef industry challenges once they leave SDSU and pursue personal goals in the beef industry," she concludes.



plan to achieve their goals in the beef industry. We want to see that the next generation has the opportunity to continue to be on the land and keep ranching and beef production a viable industry within the state," SDSU's Julie Walker concludes.

On the national level, several other states also offer "Beginning Farmer" programs funded through USDA grants. Check with your local Extension office or Farm Service Agency (FSA) for more information.

As well, USDA has recently established an online tool to link retiring farmers who have expiring Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts with beginning farmers or ranchers who are interested in bringing the land into production. The new online resource, TIP Net, is a website provided by the FSA.

Through the Transition Incentives Program (TIP), producers with land for sale or lease are introduced to qualified beginning

or socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers who want to buy or rent land for their operations.

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack has said this tool should facilitate the transition of land to the next generation of farmers.

TIP provides up to two additional CRP annual rental payments to a retired or retiring owner or operator with an expiring CRP contract. To qualify, the landowner must sell or lease the CRP land to a beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher so the new operator can convert some or all of the land to production using sustainable grazing or crop production methods.

For beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers who cannot qualify for conventional credit, FSA offers financing as well.

Additional information on TIP Net can be found online at www.fsa.usda.gov.