



Snippets on

How do other industries broach the subject?

commentary by **Kindra Gordon**, field editor

As the beef industry continues discussion on how best to define sustainability and convey our efforts to consumers, I've had some interesting firsthand observations with how other industries are addressing this issue.

My first experience came in February 2016, while attending an evening of wine tasting in Spearfish, S.D., just 20 miles from my home. It was a small event for about 20 people hosted by a wine distributor. Half a dozen wines from three different California- and Washington-based wineries were featured. What was most interesting to me was that the theme for the evening focused on the fact each of the wineries had been operating as "family businesses" for multiple generations — and thus the distributor was promoting their "sustainability."

I instantly thought of the parallel to multi-generational farms and ranches.

As the wine distributor continued to espouse information about each family winery — much of which he had simply gleaned from their company websites — I watched the crowd listen intently. The distributor gave a simple overview of how the wineries care for the land, use "green" (biobased) fuel in their equipment, and are focused on management and packaging that they promote as fostering a sustainable environment.

Wine industry examples

As examples of some of the sustainable practices, one of the

wineries promoted the use of "lightweight" ECO glass bottles, which are made with 25% less glass than an average wine bottle — and, according to the winery, require much less fuel to transport and result in a 13% reduction in carbon emissions.

Additionally, the presenter pointed out that the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance has a certification process for growers, and those who receive certification of their vineyards can put the "sustainable" label on their packaging. Very little information was shared as to the specifics that certified wineries must adhere to, but the audience that evening was impressed that this certification existed and generally assumed it must be "a good thing." (I later did an Internet search and found that some of the practices included general management like monitoring for disease among the vines, proper pesticide storage, having a drought plan and utilizing cover crops; see more at www.sustainablewinegrowing.org.)

Overall, I found the evening was one of very basic information from a marginally credible source who admitted he had not been to these wineries in person. The wine wasn't even that great. However, the others in attendance did not appear to share my concern. Instead, they were reveling in the information that gave them a small glimpse at how the grapes were produced for this very wine they were sipping. What seemed important to them was the fact that someone was taking time to share information and communicate with them.

One woman in her 60s even matter-of-factly announced to anyone who would listen: "Buying products from sustainable businesses is really important to me."



Sustainability



East Coast experiences

Six months after this South Dakota wine-tasting experience, I traveled to Maine for a family vacation in August 2016 — and the term sustainability caught my attention once again.

While driving along the countryside near Acadia National Park, a sign for Sweet Pea Café beckoned to us with its “farm-to-table” signage. We stopped for supper and were greeted at the door by a host who boasted of the fact that all of the menu items were homemade from local ingredients, many of which were produced on the adjacent Sweet Pea Farm.

Upon being seated, my husband asked how long they’d been in business. The host explained that the restaurant was established within the last couple years, but went on to say “... we’ve been a sustainable farm since 1986.”

No additional explanation was given by the server, and because every seat in the small restaurant was filled, I didn’t have the opportunity to pepper him with questions. I was struck by how this café had figured out that sustainability is a term that currently resonates with consumers and had found a way to smoothly slide it into their marketing.

I also gave an incredulous laugh at the fact that it’s likely their definition of sustainable simply meant the farm had been established in 1986 and had been able to continue operating year after year. In that case, beef producers could certainly make use of this application and in future conversations with consumers (and the media) note that they have been a “sustainable farm (or ranch)” since the date the operation was founded.

Surprisingly, the

sustainable term came up one more time during my vacation while on a lobster boat tour off the coast of Kennebunkport, Maine. The tour, which was run by an enterprising individual and one assistant, was conducted on a small boat created to mimic a real lobster boat experience. The boat was full with 22 tourists aboard for the 1.5 hour tour. (Tours are offered twice a day, five days a week during the summer tourist season and are typically sold out.)

The two tour guides — one of whom had actual lobster-fishing experience — took turns telling us about lobster anatomy, the traps used to catch the lobster, and which lobsters can be kept and which must be thrown back as we traveled from one lobster trap to the next checking for lobster. There was a fair amount of technical information, and they emphasized how a female lobster with eggs or lobsters that measure too small or too large are required to be thrown back into the ocean to, in their words, “ensure the sustainability of the lobster population.”

Our tour guides also went into detail about the legalities of becoming licensed to operate a lobster boat. Interestingly, state law in Maine mandates each lobster boat must remain owner-operated — with only two individuals allowed on each lobster boat, one of whom must be the owner of the license.

At the conclusion of the tour, as if on cue, a middle-aged couple expressed their thanks to the tour guides and commented that they were especially interested in learning about how the industry is ensuring sustainability of the lobster population for the future.

My takeaways

After reflecting on each of these experiences, it is evident sustainability is a term consumers are interested in across all industries — and it is shaping business for the future.

With that said, I think it is simply a new word for many of the conservation and stewardship efforts beef producers already employ — controlled grazing, preconditioning, drought planning, planned breeding seasons, etc. The challenge ahead is creating opportunities to have conversations with consumers about those management efforts and how they contribute to the sustainable goals of every farm and ranch.

Perhaps my biggest takeaway from these experiences is the fact that consumers are seeking opportunities for dialogue and communication. They are not looking for a technical explanation of every detail about the production process. They simply want an opportunity to engage with a representative from the industry, learn an overview of how the product is produced, and go home with a sense that the producer truly cares about the land and the products they are producing for the marketplace.

Also of note, in both the wine and lobster gatherings, the information came from industry representatives — not actual producers. While I would have preferred to have visited with real producers, all of the other consumers who participated seemed content with the format. To this point, in the future, beef industry representatives or organizations can still make inroads with consumers via different educational venues when real-life farm or ranch tours are not an option.

Bottom line, most American farmers and ranchers are already doing the things that consumers consider sustainable practices. Our industry must follow suit with others in becoming more vocal and public about sharing our sustainability efforts. Like the old advertising adage by Stuart Henderson Britt suggests, we’ve got to advertise what we do and why. He said, “Doing business without advertising is like winking at a girl in the dark. You know what you are doing, but nobody else does.”

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Editor’s Note: Kindra Gordon is a freelance writer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.

