

Cattle Industry Summer Conference Highlights

Story & photos by **Troy Smith**, field editor

By the close of the 2015 Cattle Industry Summer Conference, cattle industry leaders had adopted a new Beef Industry Long-Range Plan, approved an increase in National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) membership dues and reaffirmed the association's position on a number of hot-button issues.

The danger of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD), beef's place in the government's dietary guidelines, country-of-origin labeling (COOL) and the Environmental Protection Agency's *Waters of the United States* (WOTUS) rule were discussed at the conference July 15-18 in Denver, Colo. A packed schedule of educational sessions and action-planning meetings were conducted by NCBA, the Cattlemen's Beef Promotion and Research Board (CBB) and the American National CattleWomen (ANCW).

Time was allotted during two conference general sessions to introduce the new Beef Industry Long-Range Plan forged by a 16-member task force representing various beef industry segments. Meant to be a roadmap for guiding industry advocacy efforts for the next five years, the plan is built around four core strategies:

► **Drive growth in beef exports**

by advocating for free trade and unfettered access to key export markets; encouraging adoption of individual animal identification systems; and promoting U.S. beef's unique attributes of quality, safety, sustainability and nutritional value.

► **Protect and enhance the business in a political climate**

by motivating producer engagement in public policy development that is favorable to the beef production community and guarding against legislation and agency regulations that have a negative impact. This strategy also calls for efforts to position beef as part of a healthy diet; encourage and promote research of technologies that improve productivity, efficiency and animal well-being; and develop strategies to attract, develop and enable the next generation of beef producers — particularly in the cow-calf sector.

► **Grow consumer trust in beef and beef production**

by facilitating establishment

of standards to certify and verify production and management practices to address consumer concerns. This strategy calls for increased investment in beef safety and production technologies, and specifically seeks initiatives and research to ensure responsible stewardship of antibiotics and the development of alternatives. Included is reaffirmation of the need to align the industry and its partners in defense of the beef industry and American agriculture against attacks that undermine consumer trust.

► **Promote and strengthen beef's value proposition** by promoting innovative beef merchandising and communicating beef's nutritional benefits and value to consumers. Also called for is collaboration among industry stakeholders to conduct sustainability research, demonstrate continuous improvement and communicate with consumers regarding these efforts and the progress achieved.

"Our objective is to grow beef demand by 2% every year for the next five years," said task force co-chair and Minnesota cattleman Don Schiefelbein. "That is what we have to do to maintain price levels for the expected beef supply."

Disease mitigation

Schiefelbein and a panel of other task force members fielded audience questions, including those related to the plan's recommendation for individual animal identification. Nebraska seedstock breeder Bill Rishel explained that the plan does not call for mandatory adoption of any specific identification system or systems. However, cattle producers are urged to implement some means of individual animal identification to facilitate traceback. He noted how the lack of traceability is hindering access to certain foreign markets, such as China.

"We've seen that source identification programs have value in opening and growing export markets, and traceability would also be valuable in the event of a disease outbreak," said Rishel.

The potential for an outbreak of disease introduced from a foreign country — FMD, for example — has been a concern among informed cattlemen. That concern was heightened by USDA's decision to allow imports to the United States of chilled and frozen beef from 14 states in Brazil and the Patagonia region of Argentina. The United States has been free of the highly contagious disease of cloven-hooved animals since 1929, but both South American countries have histories of FMD outbreaks.

While FMD poses no threat to human health, an outbreak in the United States could be devastating to the beef, pork and sheep industries. Besides the danger FMD poses to animal health and well-being, control and eradication measures would exact a heavy toll. Response to an outbreak typically involves the destruction of infected and exposed animal populations.

In addition to its impact on livestock production and thus meat supplies and prices, reintroduction of FMD to the United States would interrupt international trade. A negative effect on the stock market would be expected. Economists speculate that, depending on its severity, an FMD outbreak in the United States would cost tens of billions of dollars.

"Non-ag people and even some people involved in animal agriculture do not understand the potential impact of FMD. Even though it is not a danger to human health, the economic impact could be huge," stated Burke

Healey, veterinarian and executive director of Surveillance, Preparedness and Response Services for USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), who spoke during the Denver conference.

Healey said APHIS response would



► At the Cattle Industry Summer Conference, Minnesota Angus breeder Don Schiefelbein talks about the Beef Industry Long-Range Plan. Schiefelbein co-chaired the task force responsible for drafting the new five-year plan. "Our objective is to grow beef demand by 2% every year for the next five years," he shared.

depend on the size of an outbreak, but heading the list of response strategies is one the agency calls “Stamp-Out,” whereby infected and exposed animals are destroyed. Healey admitted, however, that experience gained through response to avian influenza suggests that APHIS may not be well-prepared to deal with an FMD outbreak.

“We’ve had ‘Plan A’ for 75 years, but what if it doesn’t work? It’s scary to think about,” said Healey.

Potential alternatives to large-scale animal depopulation would involve less extensive Stamp-Out measures combined with vaccination to mitigate the spread of FMD. The problem, according to Healey, is that the North American “bank” of FMD vaccine contains 25 million doses. That probably isn’t enough, considering the virulence of FMD and its potential for rapid spread, the fact that multiple livestock species are susceptible, and the fact that the vaccine bank is shared with Canada and Mexico.

Twenty-five million doses might be adequate for handling a small to moderate FMD outbreak. Healey explained that building the bank of vaccine to a level needed for response to a large outbreak would cost \$150 million each year for five years.

After that, maintaining the expanded storehouse of vaccine would cost \$70 million per year. The question confounding this scenario, said Healey, is “Where will the money come from?”

NCBA opposed opening U.S. borders to fresh beef from Brazil and Argentina, questioning whether USDA had adequately investigated the ability of either country to mitigate the risks of FMD contamination. NCBA staff veterinarian Kathy Simmons said the association was criticized for taking a protectionist stance to ward off competition from South American beef imports.

“NCBA’s opposition was not based on trade. It was and still is based on risk to animal health,” Simmons said, noting that the association questioned how the Obama administration hurriedly set the import rule before a review process could be completed.

“We believe there were violations in the use of an Executive Order in the rule-making process. And issuing the rule during the same week that the president of Brazil visited the U.S. suggests political motivation,” added Simmons. “NCBA is still pushing for



► On the conference’s final day, NCBA board members approved a 50% increase in membership dues.

reconsideration of the import rule. We’re not done.”

COOL

According to NCBA Vice President of Government Affairs Colin Woodall, the association continues to oppose COOL

and will continue lobbying for its full repeal. Woodall reminded his audience that both Canada and Mexico have objected to the labeling law, calling it an unfair barrier to trade. Attempts to fix the labeling law to make it more palatable have failed. Woodall said the World Trade Organization has voted four times on the COOL issue, each time siding with the objectors and against the United States.

“The governments of Canada and Mexico have said there are two options — repeal COOL or deal with trade retaliation in the form of tariffs on U.S. products exported to both countries.

This will affect not only beef but a host of U.S. products,” explained Woodall, citing strong support for repeal in the House of Representatives but opposition in the Senate. “Some lawmakers still think they can fix COOL and Canada and Mexico won’t follow through on their threats. I think it’s not a matter of if they retaliate, but when. I expect them to act by mid-October.”

Dietary guidelines

NCBA Director of Legislative Affairs

Kristina Butts provided an update regarding NCBA’s response to the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee’s report issued last February. The Committee’s recommendations are meant to serve as the foundation for the latest version of *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, to be published jointly by USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Butts said NCBA and a growing coalition of interested organizations have expressed concern over the report’s recommendation for lower consumption of red meat despite ample scientific evidence that nutrient-rich lean meat fits within a healthful diet. Particularly objectionable was language in the report that referred to diets higher in plant-based foods and lower in animal-based foods as more “sustainable” and having less impact on the environment.

According to Butts, the committee veered away from its charge to make science-supported recommendations promoting nutritious dietary patterns by offering recommendations based on opinions regarding the sustainability of meat production. NCBA has supported efforts in both houses of Congress to block funding for release of the *2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* unless language in the final version includes recommendations based on strong science and are limited to matters of diet and nutrition.

“I’m confident that ‘lean meat’ will be returned to the *Guidelines*,” stated Butts. “From a nutrition standpoint, the scientific evidence is there.”

WOTUS

NCBA President and Chugwater, Wyo.,

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► Nebraska Angus breeder Bill Rishel served on the task force responsible for drafting the new long-range plan. He and some fellow task-force members explained aspects of the plan during a general session of the Cattle Industry Summer Conference.

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rancher Philip Ellis said NCBA stands firmly opposed to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) WOTUS rule, calling it a dangerous example of regulatory overreach. Ellis said the rule's language is vague and could be interpreted to mean the EPA has jurisdiction over ditches, ponds and even stock tanks. Consequently, NCBA has joined with other land-user groups in litigation to halt implementation of the WOTUS rule.

On the conference's final day, NCBA board members approved a 50% increase in membership dues. Accordingly, the annual dues for cow-calf operations with up to 100 head will increase from \$100 to \$150. The cow-calf dues rate will increase by \$150 for each additional 250 head. Annual dues for stocker operations will be \$150 plus 38¢ per head. Feedyards will pay 19¢ per head based on the number of animals marketed annually.

California rancher and NCBA Policy Division Chairman said prioritized areas for investment of additional dues revenue include government relations, promotion of international market access and development of beef sustainability initiatives. The new dues structure becomes effective Oct. 1, 2015.

