

A New Kind of Roundtable

Knights aren't the only heroes invited to this one.

Story & photos by *Shelby Mettlen*, assistant editor



Norman poet Robert Wace first described King Arthur's Round Table in the year 1155 as a table around which Arthur and his famed knights would congregate to humbly discuss issues or settle disputes. As the name suggests, the table had no head, implying that each individual seated around it was no greater than any other; each possessed equal status. Carrying the tradition of King Arthur's chivalric order into the 21st century are 98 experts and leaders representing every facet of the beef industry, from cow-calf production through cattle feeding and all the way to the end consumer. Though likely not clothed in Medieval garb or donning gold crowns, the members of the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB) are serving as champions for the sustainability of the beef industry in modern agriculture.

The organization hosted its second conference as a precursor to the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's (NCBA) annual Summer Business Meeting in Denver, Colo., on July 12-13. There, the group's members convened to discuss the past year's

accomplishments and the coming year's goals.

Everyone's invited

Formed in March 2015, the USRSB is the result of many years of effort to try to reach a common view of sustainable beef production and how to improve sustainable beef production in the United States in a way that complements all members of the beef value chain, says Nicole Johnson-Hoffman, former chair of the organization.

"We've had a really productive first year," says the vice president and North American managing director for Cargill Value Added Meats and McDonald's Business Unit, adding that the work of the Roundtable's members far exceeded her expectations for its first year.

"Roundtable means that it's going to have multi-stakeholder representation, meaning you will have people from the industry, but you're also going to have some of the industry's critics, and we're all going to work together to come to a common perspective," she explains. "We formed the group, and

then we had ninety-three individuals and organizations who said that they wanted to join as members," she says, emphasizing each syllable of the number. "For me, that was a tremendous accomplishment, just by itself."

To help track progress, the Roundtable established six high-priority indicators: Animal health and well-being; efficiency and yield; land resources; water resources; air and greenhouse gas emissions; and worker safety and well-being. Additionally, it has three key working groups: Indicators and goals for progress; verification; and sustainable solutions.

It's the USRSB's multi-stakeholder approach that will make it successful, says Rickette Collins, chair-elect for the organization and director of quality systems with McDonald's Corp.

"That's really the key that's making this group successful in its first year, being able to bring all of those segments of the value chain together," she says. "Not only having the number of founding members that we had form the organization, but the fact that we still have more than 90 members and that we're continuing to see non-members



participate in these types of sessions and show interest throughout the working groups. We're tagging into experts in the field of sustainability who may not be members, but they're bringing that expertise into the working groups and providing that as part of the overall work."

USRSB includes membership from five constituencies, including producers, allied industry, processors, retail and civil society. In collaboration, the five parties work to encourage and promote continuous improvement in the U.S. beef value chain by identifying sustainability indicators, establishing verification methodologies, generating field project data to test sustainability concepts, and providing a forum for open discussion, information exchange, and program development. The organization also works with the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef and other sustainability initiatives that share values and goals that are consistent with USRSB's.

Representation from the producer segment is outstanding, Collins says, but participation from organizations and individuals outside the cattle-producing segment will always be welcome and is absolutely necessary. It's also an area she believes the organization needs to work on and hopes to see more of in the future. Still, Johnson-Hoffman praises the cattle producer and declares his importance in the Roundtable's work.

"We have said that we will not do anything in the U.S. Roundtable sustainability work that doesn't work for U.S. beef producers," she asserts. "Everybody who is involved in this effort understands that if U.S. beef producers can't accomplish what we're talking about, can't be successful in their own businesses as they do this work, we won't have succeeded. So we always need new perspectives, new producers to participate, so we welcome any additional producer participation."

Sustainable at every level

What does sustainability mean to you? To Johnson-Hoffman, it's actually pretty simple.

"The way I see it is that sustainability means you're going to do things in a way that's environmentally sound, that is economically sustainable and socially responsible, and you're going to look for practices that are the intersection of those three things," she explains. "I also think

there's an element in animal agriculture today that really just includes transparency. We just need to be more transparent with people about what we're doing, why we're doing it,

and then we need to listen to different perspectives about our business in a way that we didn't used to do 50 years ago."

To Collins, it's not a matter of finding sustainability; it's a matter of improving it. How do we, as an industry, continue to improve sustainability? Again, transparency.

"It's not that we're trying to find sustainability, because sustainability exists today," she says. "We wouldn't have a beef industry if we weren't sustainable, and we wouldn't have our companies if we

weren't sustainable already. I think it's more about the transparency piece. How do we communicate and educate the end consumer and help them understand where their beef came from, how it was taken care of throughout its life cycle. It's hard to put together when you have a complex industry like beef."

Kimberly Stackhouse-Lawson represents the packing segment of the beef value chain at the Roundtable and serves as director of sustainability with JBS USA. Stackhouse-Lawson is active in each of the organization's working groups, and says the formation and development of those groups was "certainly the greatest accomplishment" for USRSB in the past year. The metrics drafted by each of the groups will help measure progress toward sustainability in each of USRSB's indicators.

For the packing sector, sustainability means improving the short- and long-term performance of the business by balancing and managing economic, societal and environmental factors. She adds that the packer, as well as every other sector in the value chain, has to be profitable to stay in business.

"Sustainability is about meeting the needs of the future generation and doing so in the most responsible way we know how," she says.



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In addition to profitability, there are two more pillars on which USRSB focuses its attention: environmental and social. Environmental concerns include the use of natural resources, and Stackhouse-Lawson says the organization knows the importance of being responsible stewards of the air, water and land. Those concerns can shift with geographical location, but social concerns are important to everyone. Social concerns include animal health and well-being and worker health and well-being for the USRSB. The packer is just two steps removed from the consumer, she says, and USRSB's No. 1 challenge is to be able to make sure customer needs are met in a way that's "authentic, genuine and ultimately meets the needs of our consumers."

Tell your story

Being transparent doesn't have to mean farmers and ranchers need to broadcast each move they make or justify each of their decisions. Johnson-Hoffman says it's up to the farmer or rancher to engage with the public about his life and his daily practices, saying we must respect his privacy, but still encourage him to engage.

"I would encourage American beef producers to be more transparent because I suspect that consumers, without real information, are more likely to come up with scenarios in their heads that are far worse than what's actually going on on our farms," she says. "What we have found is that American consumers actually really trust farmers and ranchers and beef producers, and when they hear directly from those people about what they're doing and why they do it, they feel reassured. They feel far more confident in the food supply in the U.S. and how we're treating animals."

As agricultural producers and ultimately agricultural professionals, engaging with consumers about how their beef is raised and where it comes from not only gives us the opportunity to provide accurate information to curious consumers, it gives us the opportunity to interact as people, she says. Reaching out to shake a consumer's hand bridges the proverbial gap between farm and fork. After all, at the end of the day, we're not producers or consumers. We're mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, daughters and sons — we're all the same.



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“We think [consumers] are looking for that confidence. They’re looking for a way to feel good about the food they eat and about food in general,” Collins says. “They’re not going to take that from the large corporations or the retailers. They’re looking to hear that directly from farmers and ranchers.”

Getting closer

Johnson-Hoffman says it’s been an “honor” to be involved with USRSB’s efforts. “It’s a heavy, heavy responsibility that we

don’t take lightly, to represent the needs of all the members of the beef value chain, and, in particular, America’s farmers and ranchers and beef producers,” she says. “The work they do is so important in this country and around the world. Putting food on people’s plates and delivering beef, which is the finest protein known to man — and we know that — so we take that responsibility very seriously.”

The Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation’s Chad Ellis says his organization wanted to

be a part of the Roundtable for two reasons: producer representation and science.

“Our foundation is really focused on the producer and helping him find solutions to keep him in the business,” he explains. “The second part is the science. We’re the largest ag research facility in the nation, so it’s providing that science, as well.”

To be sustainable, Ellis says an action must be profitable, but in balance with social and environmental perspectives.

“Ultimately, when we look at it, producers need to tell their stories,” he says. “As producers, we’re doing a wonderful job. We’re always striving to do better. We just need to tell that story and not be scared and embrace that to move us forward.”

John Butler, CEO of Beef Marketing Group in Manhattan, Kan., describes sustainability as “kind of confusing.” He cites that as one of his reasons for getting involved with USRSB. Identifying best management practices and being able to validate those are what Butler hopes to accomplish with the Roundtable’s work.

“It’s all connected to tying a story together to the consumer,” he says, “because the consumer, and the end-user, specifically retail and foodservice, they have done enough research to understand that sustainability is now a very significant issue, and it’s tied to the buying behavior of the consumer. That’s why we’re involved in [USRSB], because we look at it as we’re very much in the food business, and if that’s important to the consumer and it’s important to our longevity, then we’re going to be engaged in it.”

Butler says he thinks the cattleman’s greatest challenge going forward will be opening up.

“[It] will be going beyond saying they’re doing all the right things, because that’s what they’re used to,” he says. “They’re used to best management practices because that’s in their culture. That’s in their DNA. The biggest challenge will be to help become more transparent.”

Stackhouse-Lawson champions the producer’s voice in beef’s story and encourages cattlemen to speak up.

“Animal agriculture has a wonderful story to tell, and we need to come together through efforts like this to figure out how to tell it in the most meaningful way that is credible — not only to our critics, but credible to our supply chain — and really drives meaningful difference, because that’s the story,” she says. “That’s what consumers want to hear, too.”

Where’s the water?

Water is one of the most limiting factors affecting the beef value chain today, from the cow-calf producer to the end consumer. Texas Cattle Feeders Association Vice President Ben Weinheimer says the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB) chose to “start with water” because of its importance to sustainability at every level of beef production, procurement and consumption.

“[Water is] one of the most important [metrics], one of the most obvious as far as longevity, at sustaining not just the cow-calf sector, but even water use at the retail sector,” he says.

The organization focuses on water quality and water quantity to measure efficiency and sustainability across the beef value chain. The two can vary greatly from region to region and year to year, but Weinheimer says it’s USRSB’s goal to ensure the resource is used efficiently.

“It’s our place to make sure that we’re doing the best we can to efficiently use water, to conserve water,” he says, “and all of that, we’re doing it at the same time as making sure cattle have water that meets drinking water standards.”

Weinheimer says the Roundtable hasn’t put its finger on the perfect metric to measure water at each phase of the value chain, but they’re working on it. To help out USRSB’s efforts, the organization is relying on voluntary efforts by producers and other industry stakeholders to share their water usage to move forward with accurate and effective metrics for measuring water sustainability.

John Butler, CEO of Manhattan, Kan.,-based Beef Marketing Group and member of the verification working group, agrees that the challenge of determining how water usage is verified is a work in progress.

Butler says it’s the verification working group’s challenge to sit down with producers, feedlot managers, packers and retailers across the chain and ask, “What works for you?”

“We are getting input from ranchers from Colorado to Alabama, because water usage is different depending upon the region you’re in,” he explains.

Butler explains that, across the board, the Roundtable’s efforts to verify water usage, along with the usage of other resources, is still in the stage of “How?” Stakeholder input will help the Roundtable determine the answer.

Regional and state regulations differ, as do standards for surface water and groundwater. For those reasons, “it’s not really possible” to lump the management of water at each level of the value chain together, Weinheimer says.

“The key distinction is that with regulatory aspects of water, regardless of what state you’re in, the Roundtable’s efforts on water focus on what can you do from a best practices point of view, from conservation practices,” he says. “It’s 100% voluntary; it’s worried about evaluating yourself and just making sure you’re thinking about [measuring water] for your own purposes, not because of some government regulation.”

Continuing to have producer input and meetings like this one, with ranching and feedyard representatives present and in-room with other supply chain segments, will help move the Roundtable closer to where it needs to be, he says.

“There are all kinds of these big, multi-page definitions for sustainability, but I’ve brought it down to a pretty simple explanation: caring for animals, improving the lives of people, and being good stewards of the land, water and air that we’re given, and while we’re doing that, trying to be profitable throughout the whole value chain,” Weinheimer explains. “It’s 100% transparent, it’s inclusive, regardless of whether you want to be a member of the Roundtable or you don’t want to be a member; we would encourage all and any input.”

Although the Roundtable has clear dates, timelines and goals, nothing is set in stone, Weinheimer says. “If we need more time, we need more time. It’s not about time, it’s about quality of work done.”