

Engage in the Conversation

Consumers want, and need, to hear your sustainability story.

by Barb Baylor Anderson, field editor

The word sustainability doesn't necessarily roll off your tongue. Nor is it likely a word you might choose to describe your farm or ranch. Yet new national research conducted with millennial and general consumer segments finds many connect with the word sustainability, and the U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) encourages producers to embrace it.

"Sustainability of food production is an increasingly growing interest among consumers. While the word may not be your top choice, consumers are using the word, and they need to know that farmers have always been sustainable. What we consider stewardship, consumers consider sustainability," says Nancy Kavazanjian, USFRA chairwoman and a farmer from Wisconsin.

USFRA was created about five years ago to engage in dialogue with consumers who have questions about how today's food is grown and raised. Kavazanjian says the organization, which consists of more than 90 U.S. farmer and rancher-led organizations and agricultural partners from all aspects of agriculture, is committed to continuous improvement and supporting U.S. farmers and ranchers in their efforts to increase confidence and trust in agriculture.

New research

USFRA commissioned the consumer survey in June 2015 and will use findings from the research to better answer consumer questions about agricultural sustainability.

According to the research, up to 83% of consumers are interested in whether farmers and ranchers are producing food sustainably. The survey found 56% of all respondents agreed with the statement, "Farmers and

ranchers use new technologies and innovations to protect the environment." Less than half, 47%, agreed, "The way that most of today's farming and ranching operations in the U.S. grow and raise food meets the standards of sustainability."

"Obviously, we haven't talked about how we produce food enough," says Kavazanjian.

Consumers agreed the three main components that go into creating an accurate definition of sustainability are soil health and conservation, water quality and water consumption. When presented with 11 issues related to U.S. farming and ranching and asked to identify the issue that was most important, consumers agreed on raising and growing food that is safe to consume, treatment of farm/ranch animals, and minimizing environmental impact.

"The findings of the survey provide insights that will help farmers and ranchers better connect with consumers," says Kavazanjian. "There are many stories about environmental stewardship to be told. This research will help us guide our storytelling, knowing what is most important to consumers when it comes to sustainability. I'm particularly excited to help farmers and ranchers share how they use cutting-edge technologies to improve sustainability."

Talking tips

USFRA has suggestions for farmers and ranchers to effectively communicate with consumers.

"First of all, we are no different than other consumers. We all shop for food," says Kavazanjian. "We should not hesitate to start a dialogue with consumers. The survey finds the three most important drivers of food

purchase decisions are taste, food safety, and price and affordability."

She urges farmers and ranchers to have two-way conversations by asking consumers about any concerns they may have and then responding to them in a way that resonates with them. For example, the survey shows the three most important components for consumers in creating a definition of sustainability are improving human health through access to safe and nutritious food; improving the environment around farming and ranching, including water, soil and habitat; and limiting impact from potential pollution to water, air and soil.

The survey provides these additional insights to help farmers and ranchers better engage in conversations about sustainability practices, and USFRA's recommendations.

- ▶ Consumers are interested in learning more about what farmers and ranchers touch most. Frame stories about sustainability around water, soil, air and habitat.
- ▶ Consumers are interested in the human impact of sustainability. Respondents are interested in actions farmers and ranchers take to improve human health through access to safe, nutritious food and the impact they make on the local community, specifically improvements to the social and economic well-being of agricultural communities.
- ▶ Consumers are interested in how agriculture is focused on the future vs. defining past successes. When discussing sustainability, respondents want to hear about future commitments to the environment vs. stories about a farm's multigenerational history. Consumers are also interested in learning how farmers and ranchers do more with fewer resources and impact, while preserving the land for the next generation.

"Talk from experience. When possible, show them how you minimize environmental impact," says Kavazanjian. "Share what you do and use the word sustainability in describing it."

"USFRA wants all farmers and ranchers to communicate more with consumers," adds Randy Krotz, USFRA CEO. "We have done the research, and now we hope farmers and ranchers will use it to advocate their positions. Don't be afraid to share your message."

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— Nancy Kavazanjian

Connecting with young consumers

In addition to consumer research, USFRA is working to get the sustainability message into classrooms. A shorter version of *Farmland*, the documentary from Academy Award-winning filmmaker James Moll, is now available by request for a screening.

Farmland takes the viewer inside farming for a firsthand glimpse into the lives of six farmers and ranchers in their 20s. Through personal stories, viewers learn about their high-risk, high-reward jobs and passion for a way of life that has been passed down from generation to generation, yet continues to evolve.

"Schools don't get enough information that is a fair portrayal of agriculture," says Randy Krotz, USFRA CEO. "We are working with Discovery Education to develop a curriculum for all high school students that will include four lesson plans to go with the shortened documentary. The material should be ready by mid-October."

