

Hope for the Future in Advocacy

As the new year begins, it is important to remember that there is always hope for the future.

by *Kasey Miller*

“I was raised to believe that if you take care of the trees, then they’ll take care of you,” said Bruce Vincent, co-owner of Environomics and third-generation logger from Libby, Mont. Not unique to logging, this philosophy is much the same in animal agriculture.

Vincent warned Angus producers at the National Angus Conference & Tour (NAC&T) in September that animal agriculture is facing similar challenges to what the logging industry faced a few years ago.

He compared the logging industry to animal agriculture in many ways. Both are based in rural areas. Vincent said the appeal to the rural industries is the rural culture, that of hard-working, hard-playing and community-oriented people who cherish family and faith.



Bruce Vincent

Both industries thrive on family operations. Vincent said that after moving to Libby, he joined a family logging outfit that employed 65 families. According to the Cattlemen’s Stewardship Review and the U.S. Cattlemen profile done by Aspen Media and Market Research in July 2010, 97% of all beef cattle farms and ranches are classified as family-owned, and more than half of the operations in the United States have been in the same family for three generations or more.

Unfortunately, both industries are misunderstood by the general public. Vincent said that, in the past 50 years, Americans have had more time and more money, so they vacationed in rural areas. They fell in love with the environment, and especially the cultural environment.

Urban Americans leave their vacation with the desire to protect these rural areas, but due to their lack of understanding, those well-intentioned desires lead to problems.

Similar challenges

Americans are having a collision of visions, Vincent said; urban Americans want to protect rural areas without understanding how that affects rural Americans. Vincent compared the logging industry to animal agriculture in that urban Americans want to protect the environment and animals without understanding the stewardship that goes into both industries. However, that protection isn’t always in the best interest of rural America.

“Rural America is being protected to death,” he said, adding that policy in this nation is not based on reality. Public policy is created by a largely unknowing public, and that public is basing its policy on 50 years of a Disney-esque ecotopia.

“There’s a thin line,” he said, “between environmental sensitivity and environmental insanity.”

Vincent said that the logging industry was in danger because of the many lawsuits filed under the Endangered Species Act, which took 2.5 million acres of trees out of the logging industry. As a result, the logging business that once supported 65 families now supports only three.

The logging industry was incorrectly portrayed as demolishing the forests instead of recognized for the tree management practices that would sustain their business for generations. If the trees were being wiped out by logging practices, Vincent noted, he would be looking for a job. Forest fires that have since demolished acres of unmanaged timber, along with homes and wildlife, fuel testimony for the need for the timber management the logging industry provided.

The Montana logging industry was accused of destroying the water, Vincent shared. In actuality, they had developed world-class practices that were voluntary and third-party-certified. Those practices are used worldwide. When they asked why they were the ones being attacked for destroying water quality, they were told it was because they were visible and they were easy.

Vincent warned that the animal agriculture industry is also visible and easy. Most Americans are three generations removed from the farm, and they have no natural resource linkage.

Anti-industry groups use fear to control public perception, he said, pointing to what anti-industry groups portray on television. They interview the least-elocuent people in the industry and show pictures of the worst clear cut or the downer cow on a forklift.

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Then, when showing the anti-industry position, they show the prettiest babbling brook or calves out on pasture. This enhances the public's fear that the earth is in great disrepair because of the industries that currently manage it.

The unknowing public bases public policy on what they are shown, Vincent said, emphasizing that we have to show them our side of the story.

"Their ignorance is our problem," he noted.

Different solutions

Vincent said the logging industry waited too long to fight. They thought it was a pendulum issue, that the anti-industry mentality would shift away from the left and return to the middle. Common sense is not going to come out on its own.

The logging industry tried to play reverse jeopardy and tell the public and the anti-industry organizations what it thought they wanted to know, instead of what they actually wanted to know, Vincent said. In the end, the logging industry won some lawsuits, but it lost public opinion. When loggers finally started to answer what they actually wanted to know, then they were able to help build a healthy forest initiative, though it will take 20 years to implement.

Building connections

Third-generation logger Bruce Vincent, Libby, Mont., speaks at campuses nationwide about hope for our planet. He started the Provider Pals program — www.providerpals.com — through which rural and urban classrooms can "adopt" rural workers to learn about where products come from. Through this program, 60,000 children have been connected with rural people.

Vincent encourages all in animal agriculture to volunteer with the Provider Pals program. We need to reach out to them, he says, because they don't know they need to talk to us.

"We have a little bit to learn about the world as they know it so we can better explain our part in their world," he said.

To better explain our part of their world, Vincent said smart rural children need to stop being exports; it should not be a stigma to come back to the farm. With a commitment to do something and to share our story, he said, the ripples that agriculture creates can become a wave.

Activists need a new piñata, and animal welfare is in the crosshairs. In order to combat the anti-industry sentiment more efficiently than the logging industry did, animal agriculture needs to show the public its side of the story. We need to advocate for animal agriculture.

Truth without a champion does no good, Vincent said, adding that associations can't do it alone. All who are in animal agriculture need to speak out in a bold and truthful manner, revealing warts and all.

Vincent outlined three truths about advocacy:

1. Democracy works, but it is not a spectator sport.

2. When people lead, leaders follow.

3. The world is run by people who show up.

Vincent encouraged everyone to take one hour out of every business week to lead the discussion about the future of agriculture.

"We need a new environmental vision in our nation, and it needs to be built on hope instead of fear, science instead of emotion, education instead of litigation, resolution instead of conflict, and employing rather than destroying human resources," Vincent said. "The new movement is going to be led by rural people because we live too close to the ground to pretend."

