

Agriculture's Battles —

Drug dependent.

Many farms feed antibiotics to offset crowding and bad sanitation.

During NCBA's Young Cattlemen's Conference, Angus representatives witness anti-agriculture messages permeating through the Washington, D.C., underbelly.

by *Crystal Albers*

Until he stepped into a crowded Washington, D.C., subway station, Illinois Angus breeder Jeff Dameron didn't realize the magnitude of agriculture's uphill battles.

Like other cattlemen, he had read a number of troubling headlines in recent years and knew animal agriculture faced some significant challenges with consumer perception and animal activism. But standing there near the U.S. Capitol with the 54 other participants of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Young Cattlemen's Conference (YCC), Dameron was shocked into reality.

An animal activist organization had bought advertising space covering nearly the entire station. Posters depicting chickens, hogs and cattle blanketed the walls and wrapped large pillars, urging passers-by to stop the use of antibiotics in livestock feed. The sight brought the group's conversational hum and shuffling of cowboy boots to a subdued silence.

"The agricultural voice in Washington, D.C., is slowly dwindling," Dameron says. "I was surprised to see how many special interest groups there are out there. Take HSUS (The Humane Society of the United States) for example. The amount of money they put into lobbying against production agriculture is amazing. They're out there on the ground floor; they have posters up throughout the subways in D.C. They have people meeting with our senators and representatives on a daily basis."

The scene is a far cry from Dameron's Normal, Ill., farmstead where he partners with his father in the family's cattle and crop operation. With his wife, Jennifer — a physician in nearby Bloomington — and three young children Jack, Ann and Max, Dameron rarely witnesses any anti-agriculture messages, let alone animal activism in the rural area surrounding the family's 1,500 acres of corn and soybeans.

The YCC broadened that perception.

"There's a lot of battles that I didn't know we needed to fight, or had to fight to the extent we need to, in order to maintain our livelihood," he says.

Challenges ahead

Dameron's desire for an agricultural lifestyle began at an early age. His boyhood interest in Angus cattle fueled his activities in the Illinois and National Junior Angus associations, and he served on the NJAA Board of Directors from 1991 to 1993. After earning a degree in agricultural economics from the University of Illinois, he took a job in ag chemical sales for almost nine years before returning to the family operation. When the opportunity to attend the American Angus Association Beef Leaders Institute (BLI) presented itself in 2008, Dameron eagerly signed up.

"It did a really good job of looking at the



► American Angus Association Regional Manager Rod Wesselman (left), Moses Lake, Wash., and Jeff Dameron, Normal, Ill., attended the eight-day YCC, which included an eye-opening stop in the nation's capital.

beef industry from pasture to plate," he says.

That sparked an interest in NCBA's similar, yet rigorous, eight-day conference and tour of all aspects of the beef industry. With a desire to get more involved in the beef industry, coupled with sponsorship from the Angus Foundation, Dameron embarked on the YCC May 27-June 4 along with fellow Angus representative Rod Wesselman, Moses Lake, Wash. The group began at NCBA headquarters in Denver, Colo., then made several stops, including Grant County Feeders in Ulysses, Kan.; Tyson Fresh Meats Inc. and an adjacent hide tannery in South Sioux City, Neb.; the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT), Chicago Mercantile Exchange

Beneath the Surface



(CME) and a beef product fabrication facility in Chicago, Ill.; several stops in Washington, D.C.; and an Angus operation in Aldie, Va.

Each stop displayed both advancements and challenges within respective sectors of the industry, says Wesselman, who serves as the American Angus Association regional manager for Hawaii, Idaho, Oregon and Washington. By the time they arrived in Washington, D.C., each of those challenges converged in legislation currently being debated in Congress — legislation that Wesselman says has consequences for cattlemen, packers, feeders and retailers alike.

“I’ve been familiar with these subjects because I’m on the board of directors for the Washington Cattlemen’s Association, but YCC brought it into better light as to how these groups work,” Wesselman says.

The subway station is a prime example, he notes.

“Here’s where Congressmen and senators travel,” Wesselman says, referring to the station. “And not only them, it’s influencing all their staffers and aides, people who work in their offices, people they consult with. ... Now we’re seeing some legislation in Congress that we are having to fight. They’ve been able to get legislation on the floor that’s being discussed.”

Specifically, the Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act (PAMTA) introduced in both the House and Senate in March. The act would ban the use of antibiotics in livestock as a preventive measure. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg, Dameron notes.

“We heard a lot about ethanol production and how that’s affecting feeder calf markets and the input side of raising cattle, but some of these legislative issues will have a far greater impact than ethanol or input prices in the future,” he says, citing the Clean Water Restoration Act, national animal identification (ID) considerations, and cap-and-trade legislation among significant challenges. “It left me wondering if we’re doing enough to share our side of the story.”

Get involved

2009 Young Cattlemen’s Conference (YCC) participants Jeff Dameron, Normal, Ill., and Rod Wesselman, Moses Lake, Wash., suggest seedstock and commercial cattle producers become advocates for animal agriculture.

“Groups like NCBA (National Cattlemen’s Beef Association) don’t have anywhere near the amount of money that special interests have at their disposal today. That’s one of the biggest challenges,” Dameron says. “It’s going to take a lot of hard work to get our message to resonate as well as some of the messages coming from special interest groups.”

Wesselman says he strongly encourages fellow cattlemen to become active through their local and state cattlemen’s organizations as well as NCBA.

“As purebred Angus breeders, we’re just part of the chain,” he says. “We need to work together and be active. It doesn’t matter if you’ve got one cow or you’ve got 2,000 cows.”

Wesselman says a good place to begin is the YCC, which offers a crash course in the beef industry, from start to finish.

“I put being on the YCC tour in the top 10% of my experiences in the livestock industry,” he says. “It is a very powerful, very educational opportunity. I encourage anyone to go.”

Individuals interested in the 2010 YCC may send applications to the Angus Foundation, the American Angus Association’s not-for-profit organization that has been sponsoring representatives since 2003. Individuals have until Monday, Jan. 4, 2010, to submit applications to the Angus Foundation by the postmark deadline. Applications can be downloaded from the Angus Foundation’s web site, www.angusfoundation.org, beginning Dec. 1, 2009.

As Dameron notes, agricultural groups don’t even come close to competing with the multimillion-dollar budgets and high-profile connections of animal activist organizations such as HSUS. He says producers will need to take up some of the slack.

“We essentially need to do more with less,” Dameron says. “We need to do a better job of sharing our message with consumers and politicians who are making the decisions that affect us down the road.”

Unified approach

Doing a better job will require a team effort, Wesselman says. To start, he suggests adopting a more “universal” mind-set.

“Instead of being a cowboy or being a feedlot manager or packinghouse owner, we need to realize we’re all in beef production. We’re all under one umbrella, producing beef,” he says.

NCBA has excellent professionals in Washington, D.C., lobbying on behalf of the beef cattle producer, both Wesselman and Dameron point out. However, the two suggest more needs to be done on a producer level.

“A lot of people who represent agricultural issues as a whole don’t have an ag background at all,” Dameron says. “As far as being raised out there on the farm, having made a living raising cattle, that’s missing out there in D.C. ... That’s why when there’s an issue on a local level, we need to be willing to stand up and share our side of the story,

otherwise consumers are going to hear only the lobbyist’s side of the story — the HSUS side.”

The Angus breed has a significant stake in the beef industry’s message to consumers. “As breeders we are very fortunate to be in a leadership position, but with that comes an added responsibility,” Dameron says, noting consumers’ familiarity with the Angus name and its synonymous relationship to quality. Consequently, negative media coverage for the beef industry becomes negative coverage for Angus.

“The thing that we have going for us though is the quality of people, not just in Angus, but within the beef industry as a whole, all the way from the packer to the feeder to the animal health [entities] that rely on our industry,” he says.

If those different segments can find a way to work together, the industry can overcome its many challenges and keep young people coming back to the business, Wesselman says, “and that’s important for the sustainability of not only Angus, but agriculture as a whole.”

Both Dameron and Wesselman are confident in their fellow cattlemen.

“We have a lot of challenges; we have a lot of issues, but we have the right people to address those issues as we go forward,” Dameron says. “While I get pessimistic about some of the challenges that we have ahead of us, I’m sure optimistic about overcoming them.”

