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Young Consumers

Ag literacy can start with the next generation of beef buyers.

by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

Why do you have to milk a cow when you can just buy the milk at the grocery store?"

While we in the agriculture industry might shake our heads at this question, it was a real question posed to Jenny Keyes, who works with Nebraska's Ag Sack Lunch Program. Young people will be tomorrow's consumers and beef producers, and there are many ways to educate school-age youth. It just takes some creativity, patience and an openness to having fun.

Reading to classes

Young school children have a zest for learning, and new experiences in the classroom are even more exciting. The American National CattleWomen (ANCW) Consumer Youth Education & Curriculum Working Group is working to increase beef's presence in the classroom.

The group has many ways to help cattlemen feel comfortable presenting beef education to young consumers in the classroom. ANCW members develop the

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curriculum for toolkits using reliable facts and information about the beef industry, which come from research funded by the Beef Checkoff Program. The development of the actual online toolkits, which are made to serve as a resource for cattlemen and educators, is also funded by the beef checkoff.

To most people, says Rebecca Been, member of the working group, "reading a book to a class is less intimidating than presenting a lesson for a set period of time."

The Reading in Classrooms toolkit enables cattle producers to participate in classrooms by providing a sample letter to teachers, an extensive book list, prop ideas, cost estimates, materials needed, discussion questions and a discussion geared for teachers if an agriculturalist can't present the information.

"These toolkits will help ensure success, because when [cattle producers have] a better first experience, [they are] more likely



PHOTO BY KASEY BROWN

to continue presenting to classrooms,” Been added.

The second toolkit, explains Barbara Jacques, member of Consumer Youth Education & Curriculum Working Group, is an Earth Day toolkit. It is centered on the book *Amazing Grazing* by Cris Peterson and ruminant activities provided by the Cattlemen’s Beef Board. There is a checkoff-funded *Grass to Grain* video and an interactive quiz that goes along with the book. These supplemental materials can be emailed, making it easier and more cost-effective to reach teachers.

The book is available on *Amazon.com* for less than \$10, and the *Grass to Grain* video is available at www.explorebeef.org/GrasstoGrain.aspx.

At the 2013 Cattle Industry Convention and National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) Trade Show, the ANCW had a booth featuring an agricultural book boutique that can “expose books written by those from the inside,” says Jacques.

While there is a long list of agricultural kids’ books available at www.ancw.org/CMDocs/ancw/Toolkit/Ranch-Book-List.pdf, Keyes offers that many “mainstream” books can be tied to agriculture. There are plenty of books about food that can be used to educate about the source of that food, she says.

Been says she has been approached for help in adding more beef and production agriculture input to the National Agriculture in the Classroom program’s curriculum. Much of the current curriculum is centered on garden education.

“They need enough industry people to link the gardening curriculum back to production agriculture,” she said.

Hands-on experiences

A junior at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln studying agricultural communications, Keys says she and her two sisters invite elementary classes out to their farm to give tours, an event she says she hopes to do more of once she graduates. The busses come out to the farm, and the kids get firsthand exposure to animals and crops.

“It’s easy for us to take for granted the knowledge of production agriculture. We’ve learned to be patient because we know they haven’t had the opportunity to see it for themselves yet,” Keyes notes.

She says she enjoys educating youth about agriculture because, “I’ve always thought that if you teach somebody at a young age, [agricultural literacy] hopefully won’t be a problem in the future. I think if we’re educating the kids now and letting them be interactive with the farm, they’ll be able to grow up and not worry about whether food is safe. They’ll be educated enough to know

what farmers and ranchers are doing to grow food for them.

“I don’t think the older generation [is] uneducated, they just didn’t have the opportunity to see agriculture for themselves,” she continues.

As a college student, Keyes still finds ways to teach youth about agriculture on a regular basis. With her college campus in the state’s capital city, she works for a program called Ag Sack Lunch program. This program invites fourth graders, who are learning their state’s history, to come to the capital and eat a free sack lunch filled with items produced by Nebraska farmers and ranchers.

While the students are eating lunch, presenters go over the items within the bag, explaining different types of livestock and crops.

“For fourth graders, we can amp up the information a bit because they have longer attention spans,” Keyes explains. “We keep it interactive. They learn the most when they ask questions.”

After the hour-long presentation, Keyes says the students come up to the presenters and tell them one thing they learned to earn stickers or a deck of cards featuring various agricultural facts on each card.

While several schools are from rural

areas, many urban schools participate in the program. “From questions, you can generally tell whether the school comes from a rural or urban area. The urban kids just have less experience with agriculture,” Keyes adds.

The program has gotten so popular that there is a waiting list, with new schools getting preference. It is an affordable field trip with a free lunch, and Keyes says both kids and teachers enjoy it.

Keyes says there are plenty of ways to teach young children about agriculture if there is not a program like Ag Sack Lunch near you. She has worked with the Nebraska Ag in the Classroom before, in which she gave presentations on nutrition in beef cattle.

“The kids got to make a ration. We brought in things like Cheerios, candy corn, peanuts and more. They loved getting to mix their own ration, and they learned about nutrition,” she explains.

Another time she presented to middle-school-age children and used popular songs as part of a game related to agriculture. “Any topic can be made for kids. It just takes some creativity. It is a really important issue that needs to be addressed. Be open to answer questions,” she recommends.



Getting started with ag education

Children love to learn. Many don’t have access to farms and ranches, so cattlemen can play a big part of educating these future beef consumers. However, the concept of teaching may be overwhelming. Here are a few places to start.

Jenny Keyes, a junior at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln who works with Nebraska’s Ag Sack Lunch Program, recommends talking to your Extension agent. She says extension personnel can give you resources, and 4-H agents can help determine what is age-appropriate material.

The American National CattleWomen Inc. (ANCW) provides content with two free toolkits funded by the Beef Checkoff Program to help present beef information to a classroom. The first includes tools on reading in the classroom; the second has a lesson plan for an Earth Day presentation. Both can be found at www.ancw.org under the Programs tab.

Farm tours are great ways to introduce youth to farm life. However, if a full farm tour doesn’t work, then consider bringing some of the farm to them. Debbie Lyons-Blythe, Angus rancher and author of the *Kids, Cows and Grass* blog, says classrooms often don’t have the funding for field trips, so you could bring a calf, some of the equipment you use in the barn, or beef byproducts to the school to teach kids about different aspects of raising cattle.

Other resources include the National Agriculture in the Classroom website, www.agclassroom.org/. There are also state Ag in the Classroom organizations with additional information.

National, state and local FFA and 4-H organizations also have resources for teaching youth about agriculture. The National FFA has a list of more than 140 resources that could be helpful in teaching youth about agriculture at www.ffa.org/FFAResources/Publications/MakingADifference/1103/Pages/140Resources.aspx.



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