



# Keys to Ag's Success

Secretary Schafer outlines four keys to agricultural success.

Story & photo by **Meghan Richey**

**A**vibrant U.S. agricultural economy needs just four main components: a strong, effective food safety system; a workforce of trained professionals, particularly a younger, up-and-coming generation of veterinarians that will practice on large animals; an animal identification (ID) system; and science-based decision making for trade agreements. That was the message of new U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer as he addressed the 300-plus crowd of attendees at the National Institute for Animal Agriculture (NIAA) annual meeting in Indianapolis, Ind., April 1.

## Food safety system

The undercover videos that were taken by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) showing downer dairy cattle being incorrectly handled at a plant in Chino, Calif., "can only be described as shocking and disturbing," Schafer said, noting that he believes all who have seen the videos agree that no one wants to see animals treated that way.



The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) responded with "all the tools at our disposal" and "took action that was stronger than many expected." After decoding the video to obtain more information about which plant was shown, USDA recommended to Hallmark-Westland, the facility shown in the video, to carry out the largest Class 2 beef recall ever undertaken in U.S. history, one that would reach back to cover the last two full years of its operation.

"We took this action because we believed that the way business was being done at this plant was deplorable, but it really didn't pose a threat to human health," Schafer said, adding that, had the case been one involving a human health risk, USDA would have recommended a Class 1 recall instead of a Class 2 recall. "Because we have the interlocking safeguards in place, with downer cows being one element of those safeguards, we knew that there was an extremely remote risk of [a] human health issue here."

Schafer labeled Hallmark-Westland's actions as "flagrant violations of the rules.

Those rules are standards of how animals ought to be treated and how slaughter operations ought to be carried out. They are there for good reason: to protect the integrity of the oversight systems and to make sure that needless suffering of animals is not part of the slaughter process."

USDA's action on this case sent some strong messages to meatpackers, livestock producers and moms, Schafer said.

"The message to meatpackers is clear: At USDA the rules matter, and we are going to enforce them. Our responsibility for food safety isn't only just human health issues — it is the overall operations of food systems. ... The message to livestock producers is don't wait until the last minute to send your animals to slaughter. Send your animals to market before they are on their last legs and can still stand the rigors of transportation and handling at processing facilities.

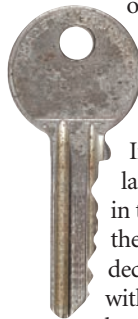
"The message to moms is clear as well," Schafer continued. "School lunches and meals at home are going to be watched over by USDA, and we very strongly believe in our mission of providing for and caring for food safety in this country. USDA has no more critical mission than enforcing the standards that maintain our consumer confidence and safety in our food supply."



►"USDA has no more critical mission than enforcing the standards that maintain our consumer confidence and safety in our food supply," said U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer.

## Trained workforce

"To succeed in our mission of delivering safe and wholesome food to our consumers



on domestic and international fronts, we need more than good systems — we need good people," Schafer said, noting that USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Systems (FSIS) is the largest employer of veterinarians in the United States. "We share in the nationwide concern about the decline in vets choosing to practice with large animals ... and recognize that we are competing with those that choose to practice with companion animals."

The key is finding the right mix of incentives to persuade veterinarians to choose careers in government service and in large animal private practice in years to come. Schafer said that the federal government clearly has a role to play in this.

"We continue to work with Congress to implement the National Veterinary Medical Services Act that creates the loan repayment program at the federal level. But the final solution to this challenge is going to take more than that," Schafer said. "It's going to take experimentation at the state level and the active involvement of educators, industry leaders and organizations like the NIAA before we come up with a comprehensive set of approaches that really work."

## Animal identification

"USDA remains strongly committed to moving forward with the best animal identification program on a voluntary basis, letting all the players in industry continue to help us create the best possible platform, one that will help us with animal certification and verification and disease monitoring and traceability as well," Schafer said. "We need to gather the information and put a system in place in the United States now."



Canada has a well-run and good, functioning system that has proven valuable to them in recent times, Schafer said, but that system was born out of crisis.

“It is important in the U.S. that we must design and build our system before we are in a crisis. ... Once we have a widely accepted system in place, we will not only have strengthened the safeguards for our domestic food supply, but we will have enhanced the appeal of American beef and pork and poultry and dairy products abroad.”

Aside from bolstering trade, Schafer points to country-of-origin labeling (sometimes referred to as COL or COOL) as another application of animal ID.

“You can’t have COOL legislation without a proper animal ID system. One just leads to the other,” he said. The labeling program specifically prohibits the integration of a mandatory ID system, but Schafer is quick to point out that animal ID remains voluntary on the federal level and that he sees voluntary participation as a logical step to complying with the country-of-origin labeling requirements that USDA is prepared to implement by the Sept. 30 deadline. (For more about COOL, see page 154.)

### Science-based trade decisions

The market has sent a very clear message this year, Schafer said, about how important exports are to the future of



American agriculture, noting again that animal ID is an asset in this area.

In March, USDA upped its forecast to more than \$100 billion in exports

expected this year, which is \$19 billion more than the record performance seen in 2007. This year is on track to be the United States’ fifth straight year of record exports.

Schafer explained that as middle-class consumers continue to emerge in other countries, the demand for U.S. products, particularly animal proteins, will continue to rise. Specifically, exports for beef, pork and poultry are expected to reach \$18 billion this year, up \$2 billion more than last year’s record level.

“For American producers to be able to take advantage of these opportunities they must be able to compete on a level playing field in foreign markets. One of the most important jobs of USDA is making sure that it is possible for them to do so,” Schafer said. “One of the best ways to resolve trade disputes is by bringing internationally accepted, scientific standards to the table. Sound science can open doors, remove roadblocks and pave the way for future growth in trade.”

Schafer pointed to the agreement

reached in late March with Canada and Mexico regarding the trading of breeding cattle as a perfect example of what science can do to improve trade relations. “This agreement expands access to what has traditionally been the largest and most important export market for our live cattle but had been restricted since 2003 because of concerns about BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy). This is an important step forward, and we trust that it will move us one step closer to the eventual elimination of all BSE trade barriers on the export of U.S. beef and beef products.”

### The future

“There isn’t a whole lot of mystery about the building blocks for [the] future success of American animal agriculture, just a lot of hard work and effort,” Schafer said in conclusion. “The future is surely going to include a strong and effective food safety system, a well-trained core of veterinarians in both public and private practice, an animal identification system and a consistent, science-based approach to trade standards within the framework of commitments to free trade.”

