

The Man Who Would Be President

Paul Hitch steps down as NCBA President-elect.

by **Burt Rutherford**, *Beef magazine*

Paul Hitch had set his mind to become the next president of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). It was his dream, his goal, the culmination of service by a man who gave unselfishly of himself, knowing that working for the beef industry's greater good is not just a noble and honest quest, but a vitally necessary one, as well.

Paul Hitch's body had other designs, however, and where the mind is willing, the body is growing weak. Paul Hitch has cancer — treatable but incurable, the doctors told him — and the news that his horizon is now one to three years gave him cause to look at his priorities. Hard.

Out of that came the decision last November to step down as NCBA president-elect and not accept the responsibilities of the NCBA presidency at February's 2008 Cattle Industry Annual Convention and NCBA Trade Show in Reno, Nev.

It wasn't an easy decision, but it was one Hitch felt compelled to make for a number of reasons. Not the least of these was that he felt it would be best for NCBA and its 30,000 members. "It might be that I just would become physically unable to discharge the duties of my office, and that wouldn't be fair to the organization," he says.

His other reason was, understandably, personal. "If I only have a year or two left, I'd rather spend my time taking a vacation with my wife, kids and my grandkid."

Those who know Hitch aren't surprised.

"He is," says Richard McDonald, retired president and chief executive officer (CEO) of the Texas Cattle Feeders Association (TCFA) and a close friend, "the most unselfish person you will ever meet. He's always thinking about what he can do for the industry, what he can do for the cow-calf producer."

The man

To many in this business, Hitch is an enigma. He heads a family-owned operation that has been very successful in a variety of enterprises that include ranching, farming,



► Paul Hitch renounced his position as NCBA president due to an ongoing battle with cancer. "He's the most unselfish person you will ever meet," says Richard McDonald, retired president and CEO of the Texas Cattle Feeders Association (TCFA) and a close friend.

cattle feeding and hog production, but he often doesn't think quite like a typical cattle producer. His ability to see a broader picture — even to be a bit of a visionary — is a noticeable trait.

The origins of Hitch Ent. and Hitch Farms began in 1884 when his great-grandfather, who originally came west from Tennessee, moved south from Liberal, Kan., into the Oklahoma Panhandle. At the time, it was called "No Man's Land" — not a territory, not a state, just a piece of prairie the federal government pretty much left alone.

"Ostensibly, it was under the ownership of the federal government," Hitch says. "But they hadn't established any permanent presence here, so there wasn't any person to exercise control. So you could come and run cattle here because

there was nobody here to tell you that you couldn't."

From a dugout near Coldwater Creek, the Hitch operation grew to include not just the original ranch, where Paul was raised, but a large farming operation, a 15,000-sow hog operation and a 160,000-head-capacity cattle-feeding operation with three feedyards in Oklahoma and Kansas. His two sons, Jason and Chris, now work in the operation — fifth-generation stewards of a chunk of No Man's Land that's become remarkably productive.

This is the broad perspective that Paul Hitch brings to the table — family roots deep in the Oklahoma soil, yet with eyes firmly forward; a vested interest in cow-calf, stocker and feedyard production; along with interests in corn, wheat and hogs. It allows

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him to see issues from all perspectives, and that allows him to share a global insight on arguments in the cattle business.

“Over the years, I’ve seen Paul in some tense situations, be it a committee meeting at NCBA or a TCFA board meeting, where people were passionate about what they were thinking,” McDonald says. “What sets Paul apart is his ability to use humor. He knows where to inject it and, all of a sudden, people stop and think instead of being divided. He was able to build consensus and compromise.”

Hitch remembers those years well. He was TCFA chairman and chairman of NCBA’s Live-Cattle Marketing Committee, which was a lightning rod for many pocketbook issues that face cattlemen.

“All these emotionally charged issues came to a head in live-cattle marketing,” he says. “Resolutions were introduced and darn near fistfights. And I somehow managed to adjudicate that and get meetings started on time and pretty much ended on time, and get decisions made. And at the end of it, nobody really hated me.”

Meetings ended and everyone agreed they were still friends, even though not everyone got what they wanted, he says. “But if you didn’t get what you wanted, at least you felt you had an honest hearing, and that I was an honest broker and didn’t have an ax to grind. Now sometimes I did, but I tried very hard not to grind it.”

NCBA issues

Hitch is proud of NCBA and how it represents cattlemen in a positive way. He reaches behind his desk and pulls the strategic plan from the top of a stack and holds it up as an example of a group moving in the right direction. But he doesn’t downplay the challenges ahead. “NCBA has a huge job ahead of it,” both in Washington and back at the ranch, he says.

“One of NCBA’s missions is not to determine what cattlemen should do, but to fight like hell to make sure cattlemen have the option to do whatever they want to,” he says. “If Member A chooses to be part of an alliance and Member B chooses not to, it’s not up to NCBA to say either guy is right. They may very well both be right. It’s our job to make sure each has the opportunity to choose whatever path he wants, and to be honest brokers to make sure they’re treated honestly.”

He thinks NCBA’s efforts to make the industry more consumer-oriented are positive, as is the strong presence the association has in Washington. “We need an association that’s there, picking up the slack, fighting on your behalf. It’s NCBA’s job to do that, and I think they do a pretty good job of it.”

Industry challenges

The challenges that face the beef industry are closely aligned with the challenges that face NCBA, Hitch says.

“We’ve got to find a way to make a consistent beef product out of very inconsistent starting points,” he says. To accomplish that, he thinks all cattlemen need to think of themselves as beef producers “because beef is really the product, and that’s what you live and die on. Once you acknowledge that, you can focus on who’s going to eat the beef and try to do a good job with [producing] the beef product.”

To that end, Hitch was one of the main driving forces behind the formation of Consolidated Beef Producers (CBP), an entity that works, in his words, “to bring some rationality to the cattle-selling process.” It seems a poor way to do business, he says, “when I’m trying to beat up on the guy I’m selling cattle to and he’s trying to beat up on me. I really don’t like that as a long-term template. I want a deal where we all make money and work together to produce a better product.”

Hitch served as the first CBP chairman and worked hard to promote the idea during the organization’s formation process. McDonald remembers that Hitch would carry a Dr. Seuss book with him titled “Oh, The Places You’ll Go!” At some point during nearly every meeting, Hitch would pull it out and recite a passage. His point was that you can stand still or you can take control. But it’s up to you to decide.

For Hitch, however, those decisions are now left to others. He’s made his choice, and that’s to spend his remaining time with his wife, Lynda; his children; an 8-year-old grandson; and the rest of his family. He doesn’t know how far off his horizon is, but he does know time is short, “And that means you don’t put off things you’d like to do someday.” He’s confident that newly elected NCBA president Andy Groseta is up to the challenges that NCBA and the industry face, and he’s confident NCBA’s members are, as well.

But don’t write Hitch off just yet. Medicine continues to produce some amazing results, and Paul will be just as busy as always. After all, he still has the beauty and promise of lots of sunrises and sunsets to soak up, and a grandson — the sixth generation — to instruct in the ways of industry stewardship.

Hitch’s job isn’t done. In many ways, it’s just beginning.



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