

Environmental pressures thrust cattle producers into

The Green Age

Can conventional animal agriculture thrive
in a world fixated on “going green”?

by *Crystal Albers*

Everyone knows environmental health is an issue affecting every being on the planet, but let's be honest. Do your eyes glaze over when terms like “ecosystem well-being” surface within a newspaper article or on your local news?

You're undoubtedly not alone. Many farmers and ranchers have been guilty of such minor offenses in one form or another. Not that it's a trivial topic; indeed, it's an important issue. But if you're like many, the environment often takes a back seat to more immediate concerns such as herd health issues and the ever-delicate balance of dollars and cents.

A significant cultural shift in population centers nationwide, however, could challenge that dynamic — putting increased pressure on U.S. farmers and ranchers and pushing a “ho-hum” environmental concern into the forefront.

“It's pretty clear now that the body of the general public is beginning to not only expect, but demand higher environmental performance across many sectors of the economy,” says Ralph Grossi with American Farmland Trust (AFT), an organization that works with federal, state and local leaders to develop legislation, implement policies and execute programs that protect U.S. farmland as well as the environment.

Grossi, a California native and third-

generation farmer and rancher, has spent most of his career monitoring issues affecting American agriculture and fighting for incentive-based conservation and environmental programs for private landowners. From his Washington, D.C., office, Grossi has seen a significant push to protect the world's seemingly shrinking natural resources.

“For years, the ‘greening of the environment’ was primarily driven by a push from the environmental community,” he says. “Now we see it at all levels . . . and it's getting ingrained into our society.”

The environmental message reaches even the most remote expanses of rural America with mainstream media touting the “go green” message and manufacturers debuting newer, more earth-conscious products.

The movement has gained quickly in popularity. For proof, take a trip to the nearest superstore.

A quick scan down almost any aisle reveals conventional products have lost prime shelf space to newer, “greener” ones, and almost every package touts some sort of environmental benefit. More floor space is being devoted to a burgeoning organic and natural foods section; the hardware department is lined with compact, fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs); and energy-efficiency is the buzzword in the appliance

aisle. The checkout is lined with reusable cloth bags, and the parking lot is filled with fuel-efficient hybrid vehicles.

Yes, it seems U.S. consumers are taking a newfound conscientious approach to reduce waste and preserve natural resources and, in the process, affecting consumer spending and the way retailers do business. Now, Grossi says, conditions could change for the cattleman.

In some ways, they already have.

Greener on the other side

Consider the drive for alternative fuels, specifically ethanol. Although its development has been heavily influenced by economics, its environmental benefits have played a key role — and there's not a cattleman in this country who hasn't personally felt the effects of that market.

Lynn Huntsinger, professor of environmental science at the University of California-Berkeley, says it's hard to separate rising oil prices from the “green movement” and push for alternative fuels. “The more prices go up, the more people want to find a ‘green’ alternative to provide some economic relief,” she explains.

Huntsinger, who has studied rangeland management and ranchland conservation strategies for almost 20 years, has noticed

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The latest green movement has helped foster the development of the latest consumer group, the “locavore.”

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more ranchers interested in boosting their grazing practices to avoid fuel costs associated with hauling feed.

“Ranchers have been interested for a long time in finding ways to do things less expensively,” she says. “Now we’re seeing even more interest in finding local forage and avoiding shipping.”

Those who have shifted their operations to mostly local grazing are making a smooth transition to a greener side, Huntsinger says.

“Ranchers have always been green in some ways since ranching is based on growing grass and working with nature to a large extent,” she says, which opens the door to enormous market potential.

“In a sense, the green movement could be a positive thing for some because they are able to market products from their ranches as being ‘green.’”

Grossi says marketing opportunities associated with the green concept are endless.

“The public wants to know how their food was produced and under what kind of conditions, and that’s a pretty fundamental cultural shift,” he says. “It’s become a real market opportunity, and not just for organic farmers but for those producing specialty

items — from grass-fed beef to locally-produced markets.”

Grossi suggests seeking out markets within the local community.

“You just have to make contacts within networks near you. Farmer’s markets are a good place to start, but there are other opportunities — like restaurant trade and other high-value markets — that are very promising for cattlemen.”

Those markets may be closer than you think, he adds.

That couldn’t be more true for Grossi, whose native Marin County, Calif., borders the Sonoma County Meat Buying Club. Based out of Santa Rosa, Calif.,

the Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, group was established in part due to increasing requests for locally produced, natural meat raised with a “light carbon footprint.”

Coordinator Jacqueline Rotlisberger says the pilot project has grown significantly since it was established in February. It now coordinates with eight Sonoma County producers to provide three different offerings of beef, pork and lamb. Producers sign an affidavit saying their livestock were born and raised within a 25-mile radius of the county

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— Ralph Grossi

and affirm that the animals were raised without added hormones or antibiotics. The meat-buying club — which features both grass-fed and grain-finished beef — then promotes its offerings to local consumers, who agree to purchase a three-month supply of meat. Once a month, members visit one of four locations at designated times to pick up their purchase, along with a newsletter and a recipe produced by a local chef.

“A lot of people really enjoy the product. They really like the idea of local producers,” she says. “They view it as being more sustainable to have access to local meat.”

The Sonoma County Meat Buying Club represents the fastest-growing and what seems to be the newest consumer group, the “locavore.” However, while the establishment of this new niche market has grown significantly, it’s still not enough market share to attract brands like *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®), says Mark McCully, CAB director of supply development.

“We’ve seen, in very isolated cases, where this green mind-set has started to surface and become a little more visible. We have heard some comments from foodservice in more extreme markets where they’re getting asked questions about carbon footprint and food miles,” McCully notes, “but today, in our business, it’s still a very, very minor portion of the market.”

Public perception

Whether producers market for a local, natural, organic, grass-fed or traditional segment, McCully says there’s been an increasing consumer interest in knowing more about how an animal was raised and in what type of environment.

“Our society continues to get further away from production agriculture, and, as a result, we’re going to be challenged as an industry to continue to tell our story,” he says.

Huntsinger says that when it comes to the environment it’s imperative the public understand the benefits of ranching and that ranchers demonstrate those benefits. “Proper grazing can improve environmental health, improve biodiversity and help control invasive species. When people know about this, it changes their attitudes,” she says.



▶ For proof that the environmental message has reached even the most remote expanses of rural America, take a trip to the nearest superstore.

“It’s incredibly important people understand ranchers.”

Grossi says the inverse is also true.

“Producers need to get to know the public better. Not just the guy behind the butcher counter, but other organizations like some of the environmental groups that are willing to work with agriculture.”

By educating oneself about seemingly foreign environmental values, Grossi says a rancher can begin to understand the public’s motivations.

“Don’t wait for them to come to you, go to them and open a dialogue with these other groups. You have to be very proactive in today’s environment,” he says.

While Grossi says agriculture still enjoys a generally positive reputation, the only way to keep it that way is to work with the rest of society to form public opinion and help shape public policy.

Washington effect

With an environmental mind-set weaving its way into the fabric of U.S. society, Grossi says producers should expect to see more legislation governing environmental conditions on their farms and ranches.

“Public policy is generally a response to public expectations and changing values in society,” he says. “Therefore, there’s going to be a steady effort to change public policy.”

Changes, however, will likely be mostly incentive-based rather than regulatory, Grossi says, pointing to the conservation title within the new Farm Bill.

“For example, there’s a tax provision in the Farm Bill that helps ranchers who are doing things to protect endangered species; they get some additional tax benefits for doing that. We’re going to see more and more similar policy changes that, in effect, reward ranchers for improved stewardship.”

Producers may also see policy initiatives geared toward marketing of grass-fed beef and other “green” operations.

He also expects to see a major piece of climate legislation introduced within the next two years. “Of course, how closely agriculture is regulated within the bill will depend somewhat on who is in the White House,” he adds.

In addition, things like water rights, air quality and soil erosion will continue to be significant points of contention, he says.



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▶As with fruit and vegetable markets, the meat industry has seen an increased demand for local, natural and grassfed beef, thanks in part to consumers’ renewed earth-conscious mind-sets.

Here to stay?

With so much media attention and fervor from political and environmental groups, what makes this “green” mind-set different from any other trend?

After all, this isn’t the first time we’ve seen an increased interest in environmental health. The 1960s introduced us to the Green Revolution and a flourish of agricultural technological advancements that, at the time, multiplied crop yields, helped reduce land degradation and capped mounting world hunger. Americans were later introduced to Earth Day and the mantra, “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.”

Could this latest push for the environment actually have long-lasting staying power?

“There are some very compelling economic reasons why this one is going to be around,” Huntsinger says. “I don’t think the price of oil is going to go back down much, and I don’t think we’re suddenly going to have a healthier environment. Global issues of maintaining our environment, especially air and water pollution, are going to be pretty compelling and keep us thinking about what we can do to stay healthy. And that’s what’s at stake, human health and welfare.”

Plus, both Grossi and Huntsinger have noticed an increased level of cooperation

between environmentalists and the ag community.

“We have an opportunity here to work with the rest of society, in spite of the noise we hear from the few of those that are more aggressive about how to approach these issues,” Grossi says. “There is unquestionably more cooperation now, and there’s potential for a lot more. It really is a win-win for [the] environmental community and ranching community.”

Of course, there will always be extremists on both sides, but Grossi says the opportunities for agriculture will fall to those who can identify and anticipate the trends and get slightly ahead of the curve. “The early adopters will make some mistakes, but they’ll also have the best opportunity to capture economic benefits of being ahead of the herd. And there are lots of opportunities. ... I really believe that these are not just fads, that these are real trends that are going to continue to expand,” he says.

As for Grossi, he plans to return to California later this year when he retires from AFT after 23 years. “As soon as I get out of Washington and get a chance to settle in California, we will most certainly explore some of these market opportunities,” he says.

Perhaps even a certain meat-buying club.

