



2010 Beef Industry Safety Summit

Issues Update Forum

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Introduction

The industry stakeholders attending the 2010 Beef Industry Safety Summit represent every segment of the beef production chain from the farm and ranch level to retail and foodservice. All of those segments have an overriding goal to provide the safest beef possible. For consumers, however, confidence in beef can be complicated by multiple issues.

“Consumers don’t think about issues like safety, nutrition, environmental sustainability or animal care as separate silos. These issues merge together in consumers’ minds,” said Jacque Matsen, executive director of issues management for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), during her introductory remarks at the Issues Update Forum held during this year’s Beef Industry Safety Summit.

“As industry participants, it is important for us to understand the various issues that shape consumer opinions and confidence in our product,” added Matsen. “Doing so will help us do a better job of communicating the progress we have made in beef safety and help us better understand where our messages might not be connecting with our consumers.”

Consumer Issue Research: Safety Issues Study

Rick McCarty, NCBA

A comprehensive survey, conducted in December 2009 with checkoff funding, evaluated consumer attitudes about beef safety, and how it relates to overall perceptions about food safety.

When evaluating the importance of various food attributes, consumers reported that quality is the most important consideration, followed by price, safety, and nutrition. In evaluating subgroups of the consumers surveyed, among food/health influencers, individuals with significant concerns about the safety of fresh and packaged foods, and those who regularly read food labels, food safety is a close second. Price is a more significant concern among men, younger adults and lower income households.

When asked which production practice produces the safest beef, 74 percent of survey participants said that not using pesticides made beef much or somewhat safer. Additionally, animal welfare issues can impact consumers’ perceptions about safety. For example, in January and February 2008, the percentage of respondents concerned about beef safety rose from 15 percent to 28 percent. The elevated concern levels coincided with the Hallmark/Westland meat recall, which occurred primarily due to animal handling violations.

Contrary to widespread media reports, most consumers do not necessarily consider locally raised products to be safer. Related to safety, the production claim “naturally raised” is superior to “organic” or “grass-fed” in consumers’ opinion; however, naturally raised claims have the lowest believability. Consumers’ primary concern about antibiotics and added hormones is they think these compounds remain in the meat and can somehow affect human health, and, as a result, they conclude that naturally raised products are safer.

“For the beef industry, safety is a threshold issue — if we don’t have a safe product, we don’t have a market,” said McCarty. “For consumers, safety is not top-of-mind on a regular basis, but only becomes a forefront issue in reaction to an incident, such as a major recall.”

Environmental Issues Affecting the Beef Industry

Tamara McCann Thies, NCBA

The political and regulatory environment has an ever-increasing impact on beef production practices. Proposed environmental policy initiatives were summarized for Summit attendees. These issues, when raised through media coverage, can influence consumer perceptions about beef production and even the safety of the end product.

Key issues that are being monitored include:

- **Climate change legislation** – In June 2009, the House passed legislation that establishes benchmarks to reduce carbon emissions 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020 and reduce by 80 percent by 2050. Similar legislation has been introduced in the Senate.
- **Endangerment finding** - Rule issued by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that claims human-caused greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) are an endangerment to public health and the environment (“endangerment finding”). Motion for reconsideration has been filed by multiple interests as potentially inaccurate data were used to establish this endangerment finding.
- **Dust regulation** – Every five years, EPA examines criteria pollutants, and dust has been regulated since 1978. Citing a “precautionary principle,” EPA has proposed regulating dust at 12 to 15 ug/m³ versus the previous 150 ug/m³. This is a significant increase in sensitivity and would mean that many farming production practices would cease to be in compliance.
- **Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) petition** – In September 2009, HSUS petitioned EPA to list concentrated animal

feeding operations (CAFOs) as a category of stationary sources under Sec. 111 of the Clean Air Act.

- **Chesapeake Bay Cleanup** – EPA will develop a nationwide model that removes state oversight of water quality issues and institutes federally established standards.
- **Clean Water Restoration Act** – Proposal to remove the term “navigable” from the definition of waters of the United States, which would effectively allow regulation of any body of water under the Clean Water Act.
- **Other issues** – The EPA is currently studying the effect of hormones and antibiotics administered to livestock and their residual effect on the environment.

Beef in Today’s Healthful Diet

Shalene McNeill, NCBA

Nutrition issues are still an attitude barrier when it comes to consumers eating beef. In a regularly conducted survey supported by checkoff funding, consumers said if they were eating more beef it was because they love the taste, it was affordable, it was rich in protein or it was good for summer grilling. Consumers who were eating less beef said it was because they were concerned about its healthfulness, they were dieting, or it was too expensive. While nutrition is still the most frequently mentioned reason for eating less beef, in the past two years, price has become a more significant reason for reducing consumption.

“We have had 30-plus years of ‘eat less red meat’ messages because of misinformation about beef’s fat profile,” said McNeill. “As a result, when surveyed, 67 percent of consumers say they are concerned about the amount of fat, while 69 percent say they are concerned with the type of fat.”

According to McNeill, obesity is the lens through which nutrition is viewed and a philosophical shift has evolved from treatment to prevention. First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign has become a driver in current U.S. food and nutrition

issues and the initiative marks the first time the executive branch has focused on food and nutrition.

Food is also used to influence society. For example, author Michael Pollan has been quoted as saying, "The correlation between poverty and obesity can be traced to agricultural policies and subsidies." According to McNeill, for many people, a broad definition of healthful food often encompasses sustainable, organic and local.

Schools offering more fruit and vegetable options and menu shifts toward fewer meat offerings are creating subtle messages that "vegetarian" is equal to "more healthful." As a result, the importance of the health professionals' role in presenting accurate messages about beef cannot be overemphasized. "Nutrition professionals have the power to withhold or recommend beef and it is important they have the scientific support for the role of beef in a healthy diet," advised McNeill.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans are currently under their regular five-year review. This is the highest level of influence for nutrition advice for consumers and is the basis of federal food, nutrition education and information programs. The Dietary Guidelines are often incorporated into media stories, so their influence is critical. The current review of the Dietary Guidelines is not just focusing on nutrition, as initial discussions also included the economics and perceived sustainability of food-production practices. According to McNeill, the 2010 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee is focusing on protein as an important component to obesity prevention, but an emphasis has been placed on plant protein. The final guidelines are due to be released by the end of 2010.

Nutrition-focused scientific journals are also becoming a vehicle to connect nutrition with the environment. For example, *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* included the statement "...it would appear that the reductions in meat and dairy foods, which are necessary to limit environmental damage, do pose serious nutritional challenges for some key nutrients. These challenges can be met,

however, by improved public health advice on alternative dietary sources and by increasing food fortification..." This mind-set among nutrition thought leaders creates additional challenges for beef.

For the beef industry, reassuring consumers about the healthfulness of beef involves informing them about how beef is a source of lean, high-quality protein. McNeill said that U.S. beef consumption actually falls within the current guidelines. "On average, Americans are consuming about 2.3 ounces of red meat per day, which is well within the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and *MyPyramid*."

Activists' Impact on Animal Agriculture ***Kay Johnson Smith, Animal Agriculture Alliance***

The Animal Agriculture Alliance was established in 1987 to monitor animal rights organizations and provide a unified voice on behalf of agriculture and the food industry. In a presentation to Beef Industry Safety Summit attendees, Smith said extreme animal activist organizations are feeling empowered in 2010 for several reasons. "The current administration, leadership dynamics within Congress, the passage of several state propositions that were promoted by animal activist groups and the fact that funding for animal rights has grown, even during a recession, have all driven many of these groups to new levels of activity," said Smith. Emphasizing the financial clout of many of these groups, she named 16 of which their combined annual tax-deductible revenue totaled \$400 million.

Several of the groups, including HSUS, proclaimed 2009 as a record year for state victories due to the number of activist-driven state ballot initiatives that passed. States have begun to push back with their own initiatives, and six states have already proposed agricultural-endorsed programs. However, Smith discussed at least 16 proposed initiatives promoted by non-agricultural interests.

The interest groups have developed extensive mechanisms for fundraising allowing for activist work throughout the country. For example, Smith

said HSUS has full-time state directors in more than 30 states. The organization is also targeting business interests and has purchased stock in several retail and foodservice companies. Corporate giving programs, such as the one with Yellow Tail wine that was widely criticized by agricultural interests, have also become powerful means for fundraising.

Emphasizing the success of anti-agriculture groups through social media outlets, Smith said that agricultural interests must absolutely follow suit and capitalize on the same opportunities for outreach to consumers. "HSUS only provides one half of one percent of its total budget in grants to organizations providing hands-on care to dogs and cats," she said. "That's something that most people donating to the organization are unaware of."

Washington, D.C. Update on Food Safety

Kristina Butts, NCBA

"Policymakers must understand that we share the same goal to have the safest food supply possible," said Butts during her presentation. Unfortunately, many of the initiatives proposed by policymakers can be counterproductive to the progress that industry has made. "Food safety will continue to be a priority issue discussed in Washington, D.C. for at least the next five to six years."

To provide accurate information to lawmakers, staffers and regulatory agency employees, NCBA has coordinated several "Beef 101" educational briefings. Topics have included: basics about the beef industry, cattle health and wellbeing, and the industry's commitment to safety. Third-party experts, including veterinarians and university researchers, have been featured speakers during the briefings. Several more topics will be included in the educational series throughout the rest of 2010.

"Unfortunately, many members of Congress feel they are experts on what consumers should and should not eat. It is the responsibility of the beef industry to educate these members and their staff, who are also consumers, about our industry and be a resource for them," said Butts.

Conclusion

While many of the issues touched upon during the Issues Update Forum at the 2010 Beef Industry Safety Summit have little direct connection to the actual safety of beef, it is important to understand that their perceived connection by consumers drives consumer confidence. As the beef industry strives to improve its beef safety record, understanding the influence that issues such as animal production practices, nutrition concerns or animal handling have on consumer opinion is critical to ensure that safety research and outreach efforts continue to make their needed impact.

For more information, visit

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