

BEEF Today

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PHOTO: WYATT BECHTEL

Sustainability Supports Beef Demand

You can't improve what you don't measure > BY GREG HENDERSON

Ranchers and feedlots suppliers of cattle to one of the U.S.'s leading beef processors are participating in a landmark sustainability study that might provide essential elements for efforts to increase beef demand.

"Our Cargill Cattle Feeder's feedlot sustainability initiative is a trailblazing effort to address an important topic that impacts all food production going forward," says Todd Allen, president, Cargill Cattle Feeders, LLC.

He's not alone in his assessment of the value sustainability has with modern consumers.

"Demonstrating our industry's sustainability is important to achieving our goals of growing beef demand," says Don Schiefelbein, a Minnesota cattleman. "Embracing sustainability shows we are responsive to consumers'

desires, rather than trying to dictate what we want to sell to them."

Schiefelbein, who served as co-chair of the Beef Industry Long Range Plan Task Force, recognizes producers may initially be wary of sustainability programs or initiatives. "It's a red flag that may get their neck hairs standing up."

That's because ranchers and beef industry stakeholders see their operations as sustainable without the help of either an industry-wide initiative or a government program, >

which is exactly the point leaders hope producers will embrace.

“The great thing about the sustainability movement is that we’re already sustainable,” Schiefelbein says. “We have a positive story to tell with our industry’s history of multi-generational operations. I hope we can embrace sustainability, not fight it.”

Schiefelbein and his family provide the ultimate multi-generational success story built on beef. Schiefelbein Farms, Kimball, Minn., is a family operation started in 1955 by Don’s father, Frank Schiefelbein.



“**We have a positive story to tell ... I hope we can embrace sustainability, not fight it.**”

—Don Schiefelbein, Minnesota cattleman

Sixty years later, with the addition of nine sons, eight daughters-in-law, 32 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren, the operation continues to grow as quickly as the family.

The operation includes more than 700 registered Angus cows on 4,200 acres, and 100% of the operation’s income is derived from cattle.

Incredible stories like this are ones consumers want to hear.

That’s the conclusion of Cargill officials based on research they conducted with 10,000 beef consumers. “We know they love beef and are increasingly interested in learning about sustainable food and how it is produced,” Allen says.

Cargill launched its beef cattle sustainability initiative this past December, and Phase II two began in July with an interactive informational and training session in Wichita, Kan., with Cargill’s feeder cattle buyers. From that meeting, Cargill developed a producer questionnaire

to solicit information about practices and management from suppliers. The information gathered from producers will allow the company to conduct an accurate assessment of operations and production.

“Our customers expressed ongoing interest in sustainable beef production,” Allen says. “The goal of Cargill Cattle Feeders’ feedlot sustainability initiative is to identify criteria we can use as benchmark measures for future improvement.”

Allen acknowledges that because Cargill’s sustainability assessment is the first of its kind, “we don’t know all that we will find from mining the data and gathering input from other stakeholders. Ultimately, our goal is continuous improvement related to the impact beef production has on the environment, communities and the economy.”

Cargill says before the company can chart a path forward, they must complete the data collection linked to the criteria they’ve identified as important, conduct a thorough analysis of that data to establish benchmarks, then work with stakeholders throughout the beef value chain to measure improvement.

“We believe it is important to ensure animal protein production will continue to meet consumer and customer demand while doing so in a sustainable way,” Allen says.

Indeed, sustainability is an issue that’s gaining momentum throughout the beef value chain.

Kansas State University’s Beef Cattle Institute announced a strategic partnership with K•Coe Isom, an agricultural consulting business, to provide educational and communication resources on sustainability topics. The Beef Cattle Institute will produce online sustainability training and host a sustainability summit next spring.

“In the coming decade, the food and agricultural industry will be facing significant challenges—shifting consumer preferences, natural resource scarcities, increasing demand for protein in emerging economies and more extreme weather events,” says Sara Harper, director of sustainability and supply-chain solutions at K•Coe Isom. “All of this adds up to an unprecedented level of market risk. Together with Kansas State and working with others in the industry like the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef, we’re creating new opportunities for beef producers to add to their knowledge on topics that we believe could significantly help them manage against these future risks.”

Dan Thomson, director of the Beef Cattle Institute, says it’s important for producers to recognize the sustainability movement is an effort to build beef



“ **We will build a better beef sector that meets the needs of people, animals and the planet** ”

—Todd Allen, Cargill Cattle Feeders, LLC president

demand and ensure the future of ranching and beef production for generations.

“We have to be viable to be sustainable,” Thomson says. “If we don’t have cows, we don’t have beef. If we don’t have profits, we don’t have producers and packers.”

Thomson says sustainability involves five pillars: health and well-being of the cattle, food safety, environmental stewardship, cost of external inputs and income.

“Through our partnership with K•Coe Isom, we will focus on bringing sustainable beef and management education and training programs for producers and food companies,” Thomson says. “Nobody cares more about sustainability in the beef industry than beef producers. Beef consumers need a clear, unbiased source of information about beef sustainability. We are obligated by the land-grant mission to provide resources for ranchers, feedlot operators, packers, retailers and others directly involved in producing safe, wholesome, responsible beef globally while providing beef consumers with the facts.”

Maybe the talking points on the sustainability movement sound warm and fuzzy yet leave you wondering about substance and how it can lead to improved demand for your calves. No stakeholder has a greater vested interest in seeing the sustainability movement succeed than processors such as Cargill.

“Improving sustainability is about optimizing the

resources required to produce that ribeye steak or pound of ground beef, while minimizing the impacts,” Allen says. “Some people seem to believe that can happen without the use of technology, or by reverting back to the days when their great-grandparents operated a farm—the so-called ‘good old days.’ We’re taking a fact-based, science-based view of what is required to produce quality, nutritious, wholesome, delicious and affordable beef as efficiently—from a resource standpoint—as possible.”

There will likely be a consumer education process involved, Allen says, because what might appear to be the most sustainable option might also be resource intensive. But he says Cargill is optimistic they can provide sustainable, affordable beef to consumers on an ongoing basis.

“We believe by engaging the right stakeholders and exploring cattle production activities that otherwise take us out of our comfort zone, in the long-term, we will build a better beef sector that meets the needs of people, animals and the planet,” Allen says. “It’s a bold move for us, and not one for those who are faint of heart.” ♦

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Sustainability: This is the third of a four-part series on sustainability and the beef industry. Next month: How you can support corporate sustainability initiatives to boost beef demand.