

# BEEF Today

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## Sustainable Sources

PHOTO: WULF CATTLE

Beef's corporate partners seek passion and commitment from suppliers to connect with modern consumers > BY GREG HENDERSON

People and the environment are critical to the success of Wulf Cattle. Jerry Wulf, a partner in the Morris, Minn.-based operation, says every stage of production in the operation's farming, ranching and feeding enterprises is tracked to ensure environmental responsibility.

"We are going to leave [the environment] in a better way than we found it and provide our customers with a wholesome product they know is safe and can be traced to the genetics they know that make up the animal," Wulf says.

Increasingly, Wulf's philosophy is one that corporate America wants to associate with their brands. Tyson Foods, for instance, includes Wulf in an online video detailing their commitment to sourcing sustainably produced food. As the largest supplier of value-added cattle for Tyson's branded programs, Wulf says, "We want to go to bed at night knowing we're doing our level best taking care of our cows and taking care of people."

That level of passion and commitment is one Tyson and other food retailers are seeking from its farmer-suppliers.

"Sustainability at Tyson Foods is about continuous improvement," says Gary Mickelson, Tyson Foods senior director of public relations in an email statement to Beef Today. "We're always seeking better ways to create long-term social, environmental and economic value. This includes collaborating with the farmers, ranchers and feedlot operators who supply us, as well as researchers at agricultural universities."

Tyson paid more than \$15.4 billion this past year to more than 11,000 independent farmers who supply their beef, pork and chicken. >



This is the last of a four-part series on sustainability and the beef industry. To read the rest of the stories from this series, visit [www.BeefToday.com/beef\\_sustainability](http://www.BeefToday.com/beef_sustainability)

Tyson says it relies on those farmers and expects them “to provide healthy chicken, cattle and hogs that have been treated properly and raised with modern, proven animal care practices.”

Such expectations are rapidly becoming the norm among companies that process and market meat and poultry. Cargill Cattle Feeders, LLC launched a sustainability initiative this past year and is compiling information from a landmark sustainability study from its ranch and feedlot suppliers. The reason? “Our customers expressed ongoing interest in sustainable beef production,” says Todd Allen, president, Cargill Cattle Feeders. He describes Cargill’s sustainability assessment as “a trail-blazing effort to address an important topic that impacts all food production going forward.”

While the emphasis on sustainability for beef producers is relatively new, many leading-edge corporate retailers have well-developed sustainability programs with measurable results over a period of years. Wal-Mart, for instance, estab-

Bentonville, Ark., headquarters. Wal-Mart says it has eliminated 28.2 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions from its global supply chain, the equivalent of nearly 6 million cars in a year. The total exceeded Wal-Mart’s goal—set five years ago—by 30%. Fuel efficiencies within its fleet since 2005 and innovations in shipping along with new truck technologies have saved Wal-Mart \$1 billion.

Wal-Mart’s biggest product category, however, is food, and the company is the nation’s largest beef retailer. Increasingly, Wal-Mart says it strives to improve food affordability, increase access to food, make healthy eating easier and improve the safety and transparency in the supply chain.

Beef’s biggest food-service marketer—McDonald’s, which sells more than 75 hamburgers every second—announced early this year the company would begin purchasing verified sustainable beef in 2016, with an ultimate goal of sourcing all of their beef from verified sustainable suppliers.

**The message from large corporate players such as Tyson, Cargill, Wal-Mart and McDonald’s is clear: embracing sustainability is increasingly important for beef’s image and to building demand for beef among modern consumers.**

“It’s critical,” says John Butler, CEO of Beef Marketing Group, Manhattan, Kan. “Building trust with consumers is the path to growing beef demand.”

Butler served as co-chairman of the Beef Industry Long Range Plan Task Force, which identified aggressive goals to strengthen the beef industry from 2016 to 2020. The 16-member task force defined the mission of the U.S. beef industry as, “a beef community dedicated to growing beef demand by producing and marketing the safest, healthiest, most delicious beef that satisfies the desires of an increasing global population while responsibly managing our livestock and natural resources.”

Striving to fulfill the promise of that mission, the 19 feedyard members of Beef Marketing Group in Kansas and Nebraska constantly seek ways to better utilize resources and produce beef more efficiently, Butler says.

“Each of our members has large farming operations with their feedyards, and they utilize resources such as manure from the feedyards on the cropland as fertilizer,” Butler says. “That’s one example of things we do to keep our operations sustainable. Beef Marketing Group members are also proactive in that we verify animal health and handling practices through third-party audits. You

“ **We’re going to leave [the environment] better than we found it.** ”

— Jerry Wulf, Partner, Wulf Cattle



PHOTOS: WULF CATTLE

lished social and environmental goals a decade ago and is seen by many as a leader in sustainability.

In 2005, Wal-Mart’s then-CEO, Lee Scott, set three bold goals worthy of the world’s largest retailer: to be supplied 100% by renewable energy; to create zero waste; and to sell products that sustain our resources and environment.

In November, Wal-Mart revealed progress toward its sustainability goals at a Global Sustainability Milestone Meeting held at its



PHOTOS: BEEF MARKETING GROUP

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## We welcome the opportunity to tell our story to consumers.

— John Butler, CEO Beef Marketing Group

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can't improve what you don't measure, and these are the type of things end users are asking for.”

The Long Range Plan Task Force identified increasing beef demand as “the single most important strategic objective” to pursue and established a specific objective to “increase the wholesale beef demand index by 2% annually over the next five years.”

Growing consumer trust in beef and beef production will play an important role in achieving the strategic objective. But industry leaders emphasize that beef has a history of multi-generational operations that testifies to the sustainability of ranching and beef production.

“Sustainability is not a new challenge to the beef industry,” Butler says. “Producers are diligent in caring for their animals and the resources they utilize to produce beef, and they constantly seek ways to improve. But we need to peel back the onion and demonstrate to consumers that we're already complying with sustainability criteria and, in fact, that we're going above and beyond the criteria in many instances.”

Sustainability should not be regarded as a threat, he says. “We should validate sustainability in our operations and welcome the opportunity to tell our story to consumers.” ♦

To contact Greg Henderson, email [ghenderson@farmjournal.com](mailto:ghenderson@farmjournal.com).

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