

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability has been a hot topic in the beef industry for a number of years, but it took center stage at the Cattle Industry Convention this summer. This set of short articles lets you drop in on the discussion.

Sustainability goal calls for climate neutrality.

by Troy Smith, field editor

Cattle folk get it. They understand sustainability is a good thing. It's necessary to survival. Still, they're tired of being told what they do is bad for the planet — that cattle production is not sustainable. It's frustrating — and not too surprising — that some cattle producers would rather avoid the subject of sustainability altogether.

Yet wishing it would all go away won't make it happen. Engaging in the conversation and steering it toward the truth is the better option, said Jason Sawyer of Texas A&M University's King Ranch Institute for Ranch Management.

He spoke as part of the "Sustainability — Opportunity or a Bunch of Bull?" session at the 2021 Cattle Industry Convention Aug. 10-12 in Nashville, Tenn. Sawyer suggested sustainability conversations offer opportunities to dispel misconceptions about cattle production's role in global warming.

Sawyer said people often forget there are three pillars of sustainability: environmental stewardship, social responsibility and economic viability. He noted none can operate in isolation. All three can and must work together.

"In the last few years, unfortunately, the environment has dominated the conversation," said Sawyer. "There's been a focus on greenhouse gas emissions and the cattle industry's contribution.

The discussion usually involves really huge numbers supporting the perception that cattle have an enormous impact."

Methane emissions, in particular, have received an increasing amount of attention during the last two or three years. There is a perception that the U.S. cattle industry is a major methane producer, even though the U.S. cattle population has had negligible effect on atmospheric methane concentration during the last 100 years.

Lost in the conversation is the fact methane is a natural result of ruminant digestion — that collaboration of processes that allow a bovine brute to turn

feedstuffs unfit for human consumption into highly nutritious and highly palatable beef.

"Methane emissions are necessary as a byproduct of ruminant production," stated Sawyer. "Trying to make methane go away is not a winning proposition, but we don't have to."

Plants take up carbon dioxide from the atmosphere as they grow. Cattle eat the plants, converting carbon dioxide to methane, which is released into the atmosphere. In a few years' time, methane is subsequently converted, in the atmosphere, back into carbon dioxide that is available to plant life. It's a relatively short-term cycle, Sawyer said.

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That does not mean, however, that cattle producers should not be proactive. While emissions

need not be reduced to zero, Sawyer encouraged producers to manage emissions with the goal of achieving climate neutrality.

Along with forests, grasslands sequester carbon in their soils, so land offsets may be part of the answer. Well-managed grazing lands already serve as stable carbon sinks, but development of carbon markets allows landowners to be paid for sequestering carbon. Technologies to improve nutrition and feed efficiency, as well as genetic improvement will likely contribute to reductions in the cattle industry's carbon footprint.

Heading a list of sustainability goals announced during the convention, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) vowed to demonstrate the climate neutrality of U.S. cattle production by year 2040.

According to Sawyer, it is feasible.

"If you can demonstrate climate neutrality, you can gain the confidence of consumers and grow demand for beef," stated Sawyer. |

Editor's note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.

A moving target: What do consumers want?

by Kasey Brown, associate editor

Only about 30% of consumers are familiar with how cattle are raised, according to consumer research, so it's safe to say most don't understand the beef life cycle. Shawn Darcy, NCBA director of market research, shared data and insights from

many consumer focus groups.

He said people want little things that are easy to incorporate into daily life, like carrying a reusable water bottle. Most consumers note renewable energy sources, like solar or using electric vehicles, are sustainable. Darcy said food rarely

comes up when they are prompted to give ideas on how to be more sustainable. They get most of their information about sustainability from social media.

When it comes to defining sustainability for the beef industry, from the lens of the consumer,

REAL TALK

Beef buyers say cattlemen are key.

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

Beef is best enjoyed without a side of heartburn, for consumers or investors.

“We don’t want people feeling bad because they enjoy a good steak,” says David Norton, president of Sysco Specialty and Seafood.

His company committed to a corporate social responsibility strategy — “the people, the product and the planet” — several years ago, in part to provide sustainability solutions, Norton said.

“It’s the right thing to do, but we’re also getting a lot of pressure from our customers,” he explained.

“Our shareholders increasingly ask more about, ‘What is your corporate social responsibility strategy? How are you going to achieve these goals or other goals that you’ve set?’”

Some of their action points include membership on U.S. and Canadian roundtables on

sustainable beef production and partnerships with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Cargill.

Norton spoke along with Kristine Young, sustainability lead with Darden, a restaurant group with concepts like The Capital Grille and LongHorn Steakhouse.

“When we’re thinking about sustainability, we’re really thinking about, ‘How do we source food with care? How do we protect the planet for future generations?’” she said. “We started with our restaurants, because we own them, and it’s always easier to start with what you own.”

In the past 13 years, they’ve combated food waste by donating more than 100 million pounds of food to hunger relief organizations. Darden has reduced their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions 33% since they started tracking it

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and have set out to be carbon neutral by 2030.

“Climate is really being driven as a conversation that we’re having with our investors on a regular basis,” she said, echoing Norton’s comments.

Cattlemen may feel like the target of much of the negativity surrounding sustainability, but Young said their participation in the effort is important.

“Your voice is stronger than anyone else that could be in the marketplace,” she told the room full of producers. “You’re more trusted than companies, than brands, than politicians and even scientists.”

Telling the cattleman’s story is part of the puzzle, but not all of it. Everyone can do better, at every link from production through

processing and that final link to the consumer, Young said.

“If we want to do something, how do we pay for it?” Young asked. “In my 15 years working in sustainability, it’s the question that I hear the most often.”

Conservation practices or resource reduction should help the planet and a producer’s bottom line at the same time, she said. Perhaps there are places where

efforts can fit into existing systems.

“Ultimately, that cost should be offset with the increased value that we’re seeing from that [practice],” she said.

Grass-fed or organic beef programs provide a case study in how much consumers are willing to pay for more intensive systems.

“There is some resistance out there to paying a premium for it, but there’s no option. We have to solve this, and at the end of the day that cost has to be passed on to the consumer,” Norton said. “This can be solved, and not only can it be solved, but it will be solved. We’re going to have to be more aggressive than we have been in the past, and I think we have to work together.”

animal welfare was the biggest player, followed closely by “don’t know” and environmental aspects.

In their research, 14% of consumers were highly focused on sustainability. Most were positive about beef. However, for the most part, consumers make “sustainable” choices when it’s convenient, Darcy said.

“Not everyone is negative about beef that cares about

When it comes to defining sustainability for the beef industry, from the lens of the consumer, animal welfare was the biggest player, followed closely by “don’t know” and environmental aspects.

sustainability,” Darcy said.

He asserted that consumers in the focus groups responded positively to education about Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) animal welfare practices, upcycling, and nutrition benefits. Sixty-two percent of consumers find producers very credible, which opens the door to swaying opinions if done well.

He urged producers to use

relatable experiences that are clear and concise when talking to consumers, especially via social media. Be cognizant that industry jargon is a foreign language to most because, remember, 70% of consumers don’t understand the beef life cycle. |