



# Up Front

by **JOHN CROUCH**, executive vice president, American Angus Association

## Bridging gap between producer, consumer

The 2002 Cattle Industry Summer Conference in Reno, Nev., which included members of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) and other industry organizations, was well-attended and most interesting from start to finish. One of the many sessions was of particular interest to me and almost everyone else in attendance.

### Consumers voice opinions

John Huston, a familiar figure in cattle circles and former Executive Vice President of NCBA's Center for Consumer Marketing, moderated a focus panel of 10 randomly selected residents of Reno, Nev. The idea was to interview each panel member before the entire group, relative to their thoughts, needs and desires regarding the purchase, preparation and consumption of food products.

Of course, the panel was supposed to be oblivious to the fact that they were appearing before a group of cattlemen. However, as the panel discussion progressed, I am sure the cowboy hats

in the crowd indicated we weren't a bunch of beet or potato producers.

As moderator, Huston did an excellent job of introducing and presenting the panel. Their ages ranged from early 30s to retirement age and about half of them were single. Jobs varied, including teachers, retirees, domestic engineers, office workers, a tow truck operator and a bounty hunter. It was a diverse group made up of four men and six women.

Huston was generic in his inquiries about their preferences in purchasing food. Beef and beef products were considered favorable with the majority of the panelists; some said that steak was the ideal meal. Beef was considered a favorite on the grill and was given high marks for its ease of preparation. Most panelists preferred beef that "looked good and was relatively free of fat."

### Consumer concerns

Almost everyone in the room began to feel pretty smug about the favorable



After a few minutes of probing panelists about their thoughts on how food was produced, handled and marketed, the attitude of the group turned almost hostile when the discussion turned to food safety. PHOTO COURTESY OF NCBA.

comments regarding beef and beef products, until questions turned to food safety. After a few minutes of probing panelists about their thoughts on how food was produced, handled and marketed, the attitude of the group turned almost hostile. There was concern about hormones, chemicals and one even mentioned his concern about "mad hoof" disease.

They voiced concern about the honesty and integrity of everyone in the food chain, from producers to processors to retailers. General distrust in the system regulating food safety was obvious. In general, the panel was skeptical about trusting authority.

Additional questioning and moderating by Huston finally brought to light comments that our food system in the United States was perhaps the best in the world, but this was still voiced tongue in cheek.

### Help increase public awareness

Why did I choose to write about this experience? The answer is simple. There is a tremendous need to make the consuming public aware of agriculture and the role it plays in our nutritional well-being. As food producers, we all know that our food supply is safe and that regulations are enforced by those in authority. However, if the public perceives food safety as a problem, then it should be a concern and it is up to us to correct this perception.

In order to improve this perception, beef producers must first assume a certain level of responsibility for the product they offer to the public. All industry sectors must be willing to implement quality assurance programs to ensure a safe food supply for consumers of U.S. beef. Plus, they must

accurately record information about animal location, ownership transfer and management of the cattle from birth to harvest. Until these changes are made by all producers on all levels, we'll continue to be at the mercy of consumer perception.

For decades, a majority of beef producers have adopted a "take the money and run" attitude when supplying a product (an animal) to the next link in the production chain. A calf is sold, the check is cashed, and it's "someone else's problem now."

This attitude must stop.

Sure, recordkeeping adds costs, labor and headaches to most commercial operations not currently recording this basic animal husbandry information. If a national identification (ID) program is implemented, it will likely add costs to the entire beef production system. However, in a market driven by perception instead of reality, this verifiable information must be recorded to ensure demand for beef both domestically and internationally.

Nearing the close of the meeting, NCBA president Wythe Willey and chief executive officer Terry Stokes emphasized that the new team at NCBA is "about relationships"... relationships between people and an industry, teamwork, and mutual cooperation and respect.

Relationships like these can bridge all sectors of the beef industry with each other, and ultimately with our beef-purchasing consumer. Together we can make our industry strong and united and ensure that the consumer is on our side once and for all. And, my friends, the time is now.