

Raising Beef in a First-World Country

by
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While there are many challenges in the beef industry today, many opportunities exist as well. Tom Field, executive director of producer education for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) spoke about these challenges and opportunities during the second general session of the 2010 Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Annual Meeting and Research Symposium.

"This is a great title for a presentation," Field said. "It lets me say about anything I want to. My goal is to step back and give you a 10,000-foot view of the industry."

"There are days where the media and politics and everything else weigh us down, and we all want to bury our heads in the sand occasionally, but that is not an option."

Field encouraged attendees by showing the volume of beef production was up, the productivity per animal was up and the quality and value of beef was increasing. He credited genetics for a lot of those improvements, but warned of consequences for all of that productivity.

"Cow herds that have less than 50 head account for 80% of beef enterprises, but only 28% of the cow inventory," Field said. "Less than 15% of cow-calf enterprises rely on cattle as a primary income. That's neither good nor bad, but it is a challenge we must deal with."

Another challenge is the amount of producers leaving the beef industry. Field said that since 1987 nearly 250,000 producers have exited the beef industry. That is even with the relatively high level of productivity and profitability from 1998 to 2008. Droughts, increased input costs, negative media perceptions, decline of rural economies, government regulations, land values and the increased average age of producers all played a part in producers leaving the industry.

Field then shifted gears and looked at the consumers the beef industry will need to focus on in the near future.

"We have to ask what our consumers want," Field said. "The baby boomers will have the purchasing power, the millennials want instant gratification, and professional women have a very strong presence in the market. The emerging consumer is

watching out for want vs. need, they are more vigilant about their spending and are making tradeoffs. They are not necessarily trading out of beef, but going from a steak to roast or hamburger."

Consumers want to be more informed about the food production process. Many want a transparent, authentic, healthy experience.

"We owe the industry and our consumers the freedom of choice," Field said. "I'm all for natural production, organic production and conventional beef production. There is more opportunity than dread in this situation, in my opinion."

For the beef industry to move forward, Field suggested producers return to professional stockmanship — and the marriage of art and science that goes along with it. One way he suggested to do this is by attending a Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) Stockmanship and Stewardship Tour. Visit www.bqa.org for more information on the tour and dates.

"Examine your attitude and evaluate everything," he said. "Everyone from your cattle to your customers to the consumer benefit from this. Evaluating will be hard, but we need to assess where we are in the beef industry in family rooms across the nation."

Partnerships are another valuable tool, said Field. Anything from partnerships with neighbors to state and national organizations can help profit and longevity. Partnerships outside of the beef industry are also very valuable as they are another way to educate those not in the business.

"We need to engage everyone," Field said. "We need to tell our positive story; get out of the defensive mode and onto offense. Communication might not be our greatest strength as a group, but we must learn. It's time to take ownership and commit 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year."

Themed "Gateway to Profit," the 2010 BIF Annual Research Symposium and Annual Meeting was hosted by BIF June 28-July 1 in Columbia, Mo.



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