

Getting Consumers on the Beef Bandwagon

Local education efforts help bridge the gap.

by **BARB BAYLOR ANDERSON**,
field editor

If you can't bring the consumer to the cow, bring the cow to the consumer. That's the plan that several Ohio County Farm Bureau groups have found to be successful.

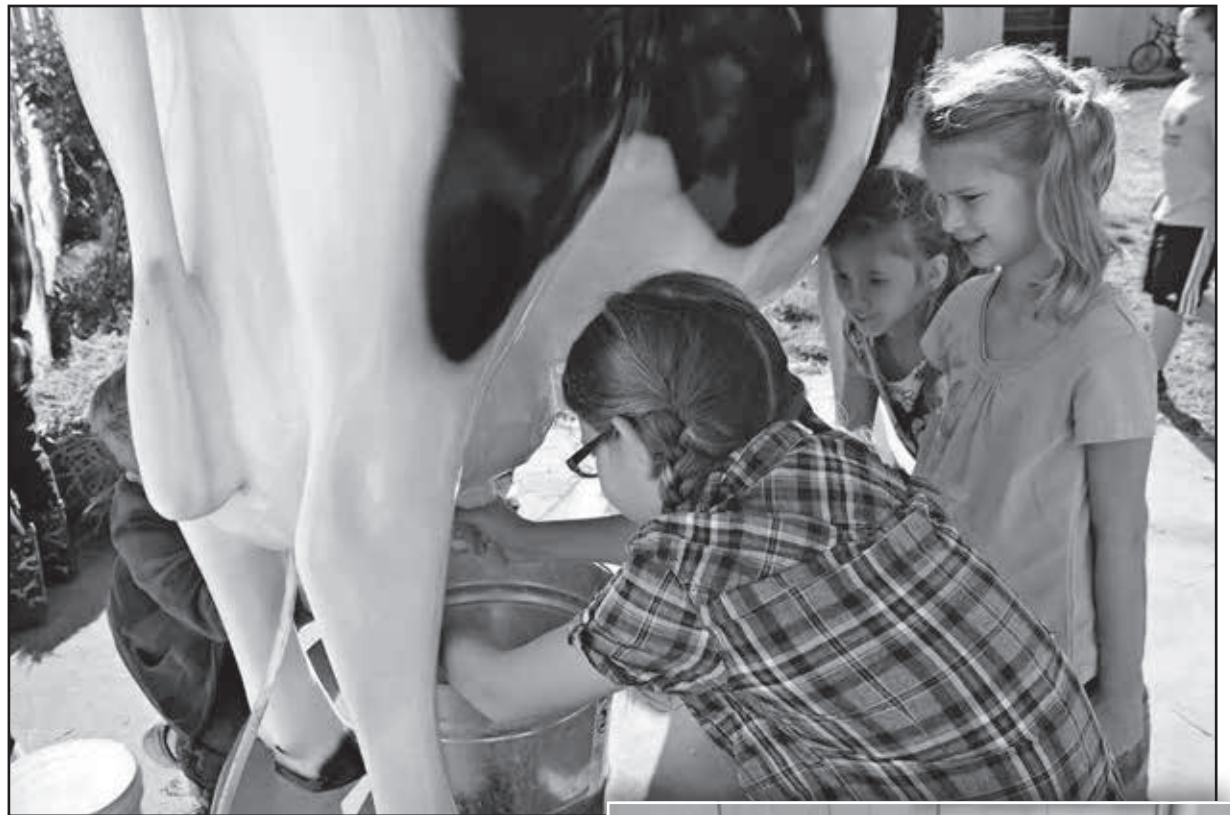
"With up to four generations of people removed from agriculture experiences, we are seeing more need for agriculture information in our communities," says Jill Smith, organization director, Ohio Farm Bureau, for Auglaize, Logan, Mercer, Shelby and Union counties. "Our primary objective is to be able to reach many people of all demographics about positive agriculture experiences. We also want to spread the word about practices our farmers are doing, as well as finding a fun way to connect to people on an emotional level."

The "Life of a Cow" project is being recognized by the American Farm Bureau Federation's County Activities of Excellence Awards program in January 2016. The idea was born from work Smith and others were doing in two counties. They had rented a fiberglass milking cow for a farm tour. Given its popularity, they decided to pursue acquiring a fiberglass cow of their own.

"In order to bring a hands-on learning experience to consumers and young people in our communities, we purchased a life-size fiberglass milk cow named Elsa. Our goal was for Elsa to help us teach people about farm-to-table production practices. We also hoped Elsa would become the centerpiece for our traveling agricultural experience lab," says Smith.

Elsa was purchased from Fiberstock, a company that manufactures fiberglass animals and custom statues based in Buffalo, Minn. The Farm Bureau committee worked with a local FFA program to customize features for the cow. They also added a platform under Elsa and had a trailer designed to haul her. While the cow is stationary, a recirculation pump and a bucket under Elsa's udder allow water to travel through Elsa just as if she were being milked.

"From the time of the first



Elsa was purchased from Fiberstock, a company that manufactures fiberglass animals and custom statues based in Buffalo, Minn. The Farm Bureau committee worked with a local FFA program to customize features for the cow. They also added a platform under Elsa and had a trailer designed to haul her. While the cow is stationary, a recirculation pump and a bucket under Elsa's udder allow water to travel through Elsa just as if she were being milked.

concept to her first outing was an eight-month journey," says Smith. "While you can never replace being on the farm to learn, Elsa allows us to show people where their milk comes from, who produces it and why farmers do what they do. She allows us to take the farm to people and bridge the gap between farm and non-farm audiences."

Elsa has been making her rounds for a year and a half now with tremendous response. Smith says she has helped facilitate more than 20,000 experiences, and has become a sought-after display at most Farm Bureau and other agriculture events. In addition, she has visited more than 60 locations and has become a regular feature when talking to both children and adults.

"We have education kits we use with Elsa that provide a fun and easy way for folks to connect to their food experience," says Smith.

"Elsa is a great conversation starter. She allows us to help dispel food myths, as well as let folks learn more about the food on their plates. We offer built-in agriculture lessons on where food is produced, animal care and the local impact of agriculture."

For example, Smith says they often play a relay simulation game with children that shows how the "milk" gets from Elsa through various stages and finally to their tables. They also turn heavy cream into butter and have other ag programs that can be tailored to various audiences.

"While the Life of a Cow is truly unique in its concept, it can be done anywhere with any animal. You have



to have vision," says Smith. "Elsa is a real draw for farmers' markets or other events, and provides consumers with a safe way to view a 'farm animal' up close and learn."

She notes beef producers also could use a fiberglass animal just as successfully. Smith suggests having a fiberglass animal designed to show its four stomachs and talk about how ruminants digest food, or create a steer with various cuts of meat labeled or products that come from beef cattle besides meat identified.

"Even just seeing the actual size of a cow is education. There are many

ways to use them in a thoughtful and creative manner to teach,” she says.

Beef up local education

Cheyenne County Farm Bureau in Nebraska took another innovative approach to consumer education. The group partnered with Sidney Public Schools to create the Raider Beef Program.

The program is designed to provide high-quality, local beef to about 1,300 students, from preschool age through high school, and save the school an estimated \$10,000 per year. That savings initially will be used to upgrade the school's kitchen appliances and later to fund an FFA program. At the same time, Farm Bureau is offering agriculture-based curriculum to students.

“Local beef producers and supporters have made the commitment to bring healthy, nutritious and flavorful beef to Sidney Public Schools. We want to help students understand the nutritional value of beef and other local crops, as well as understand where their food comes from,” says Tyson Narjes, president of the Cheyenne County Farm Bureau.

Narjes, who has a 200-cow Angus-based commercial herd near Sidney, is spearheading the effort. He says Farm Bureau volunteers began by first meeting with the school's director of foodservices to learn how many pounds of ground beef would be required to serve beef twice a week. They also had to establish when the schools would need beef since there is limited freezer space.

“Based on the previous school year's beef purchase, we estimated a need for 15 beef animals per year. Because the meat must be USDA-certified, we contacted the nearest processing plant that met that requirement. We determined what dates the beef would need to be delivered to them for processing to keep the school's freezer full. Transportation and processing are paid by Sidney Public Schools, and the plant transports beef to schools once it is processed,” he says.

So far, Narjes and others have been lining up enough beef to supply the school two months at a time from a variety of local producers and also from a local feedyard. Farm Bureau solicits local participation through a multi-level sponsorship program. Producers can sign a commitment letter to donate animals that meet USDA inspection standards and get a donation tax receipt, or producers and others can make monetary donations to purchase animals from producers.

The program has several sponsorship levels with benefits, including an invitation to the school kickoff barbecue hosted by the county Farm Bureau and an activity card from the school to get into sporting and theater events for free. At the highest level, donors get their names on banners hung in local cafeterias and an invitation to the “Trail Boss” luncheon hosted at the end of each school year. Donors also are promoted through social media associated with the project.

“The program has opened up another market for local producers,

since monetary donations go toward purchasing beef from producers who do not donate beef directly,” says Narjes. “It provides students with an opportunity to see firsthand the impact of the beef industry and gain an understanding of how it functions, in addition to eating high-quality, good-tasting, locally raised beef for lunch and learning about nutrition and lifelong healthy eating habits.”

Narjes believes they have created a template that other school districts across the country can adopt to build a positive relationship between consumers and producers. He encourages other beef producers who want to build or supplement an FFA program or create ag education opportunities for non-ag students to evaluate a beef donation program for their own use.



Editor's Note: Twenty-eight county Farm Bureaus nationwide were recognized by the American Farm Bureau for innovative program ideas during the County Activities of Excellence Awards program hosted during the AFBF's 97th Annual Convention and IDEAg Trade Show in Orlando, Fla., in January 2016. For more information about these projects and more, visit www.fb.org. A former National Junior Angus Board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelance writer from Edwardsville, Ill.