

Outside the BOX: Reality: The Piper will demand his due

by **TOM FIELD**,
NCBA executive director
of producer education



“You can avoid reality, but you cannot avoid the consequences of avoiding reality.”

— *Ayn Rand*

It is appealing in the midst of the chaos of these times to take what my grandmother used to call “the three monkeys approach,” when my two brothers and I found our way into trouble. While we would profess to having not seen, heard or spoken anything bad, she

was usually right when she assumed that while each of us individually might have met one or two of the expectations — collectively we had managed to miss on most of them. And slowly the lesson became ingrained that ignoring the facts didn’t make them go away and that sooner or later we would be subject to the consequences of our choices.

The economic landscape is littered with a vast number of decisions by individuals, companies, institutions and governments that chose to spend far beyond their means despite all the signals begging for a more sane approach. But wishing the debt away does little to affect the reality that eventually the piper is going to demand his due.

Demanding attention

There are some serious realities that demand our attention in addition to excessive governmental and individual debt:

- Agriculture will have to feed the equivalent of two more Chinas in the next 40-50 years.
- Taste, quality and price are the top three factors affecting food demand in the developed world. These factors have been at or near the top of the list for decades. We ignore these signals at our peril.
- Less than 10% of U.S. consumers are worried about agricultural production practices, regularly buy organic foods or demand lifestyle foods such as vegan, grass-fed, or free-range. Thus the market must avoid overestimating the true demand for these products. At current prices, only about one-quarter of U.S. consumers can afford organic foods. In an economic crisis, affordability must remain at the forefront of the debate.
- Savings rates are climbing as consumers become more focused and disciplined in their approach, more aware of the difference between “want” and “need,” and more mindful of finding good bargains when they shop.
- However, for those consumers who have decreased their beef consumption in the past six months, about 40% communicate that concerns about “factory farming” played a role in their food choices. Thus, we must remain committed to our role as stewards of the animals and resources under our care.
- The federal government wants to expand its influence over private property, production management decisions, marketing options and access to technology. The net effect will reduce the choices available to both producers and consumers.
- American agriculture and the beef industry are being sucked into a vortex caused by consumer

confusion, economic and market chaos, regulatory pressure, short-sighted agricultural policy, social activism, and, worst of all, industry in-fighting.

The opportunity of choice

In light of these realities, it is incumbent that we work to preserve the choices available to both producers and consumers. A “one size fits all” philosophy applied to agriculture will most assuredly fail. Instead, the guarantee of choice offers the greatest opportunity for agricultural enterprises to flourish and consumers to have access to a plethora of foods that fit their individual tastes, lifestyles and pocketbooks.

In an affluent society with a reasonably functional free market, agriculture plays a significantly more complex role than it does in emerging economies where the cloud of chronic, persistent hunger lingers at the vast majority of doorsteps.

In the developing nations of the world, food production and distribution has a focused urgency — provide more calories to better meet the minimal dietary needs of the population. Achieving this objective typically requires improving infrastructure (transportation, access to capital, etc.), introducing technologies as simple as fertilizers, pest management compounds and basic irrigation, and as complex as genetically modified plants and other biotechnologies.

Yet, in developed nations the value of these technologies and protocols is being hotly debated. Norman Borlaug, the father of the green revolution who revolutionized farming systems worldwide, said in 2000 that, “The world has the technology to feed, on a sustainable basis, 10 billion people. The pertinent question today is whether farmers and ranchers will be permitted to use this technology.” Borlaug must have felt a sense of bewilderment, if not outright frustration, at the end of his long and fruitful career as he witnessed the demonization of the very technologies he championed to save millions from the scourge of hunger.

The focus of beef industry leaders must be on sustaining a free market, limited government environment where profitability can be attained and markets expanded domestically and abroad. The industry demands principled, visionary leadership who can battle for both consumers and producers to have the right to self-determination.

Confronting the realities of our times will not be easy. As M. Scott Peck wrote, “The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.” It is easier to ignore reality, but those who will inherit the beef industry deserve far better.

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