

# Outside the Box **What I wish every American knew**

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The Aug. 31 edition of *TIME* magazine featured a cover story that decried American agriculture as devoid of integrity, value and benefit. American farmers and ranchers were, for the most part, portrayed as greedy corporate drones that cared little for their impact

on livestock, land, communities or consumers.

## **Slanted?**

Bryan Walsh, the author of the piece, depended almost exclusively on politically slanted viewpoints from the

most radical sources to gather his “facts,” even going so far as to attempt to link current conditions to those of Upton Sinclair’s writings from more than a century ago. Once finished with the article, I couldn’t help but notice that the once mighty *TIME*, a publication previously viewed as balanced and informative, had slipped to a page count of 56 — barely the size of a sale book insert in the *Angus Journal*.

At the end of the day, the shrill voices of the cultural elites would lead us to believe that we should return to farming the way our great-grandparents approached the production of food. Such logic is intellectually flawed, and these assertions are comparable to advocating for replacing UPS with the Pony Express.

Yet, the challenge remains: How do we engage the American people in an informed conversation about our food production system? In the 1980s, Don Hirsch wrote a book about assuring historic, geographic and cultural literacy in which he described a vision for what Americans needed to know to be good citizens. Perhaps it is time for a comparable work on the subject of our agriculture system.

## **Talking points**

Given the opportunity to write the chapter on beef, I would want to include the following points at a minimum.

1. Beef is a great choice for inclusion in a well-balanced diet. Beef is a nutrient-dense food that provides a higher proportion of several critical nutrients than it does calories — specifically protein, zinc, iron, niacin and vitamin B<sub>12</sub>. Because of its unique combination of saturated and unsaturated fatty acids and the reality that some saturated fatty acids found in beef are actually beneficial, a steak with industry average levels of marbling contains as much as 75% fatty acids that are either neutral to or actually lower cholesterol levels.
2. Americans do not overconsume beef. In fact, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) food pyramid used to recommend daily servings of the major food groups shows that only protein is consumed in accordance with the guidelines — while fats, oils and sugar are overconsumed; and vegetables, fruits, dairy and carbohydrates from bread, rice, cereal and pasta are underconsumed.
3. Taken on a system-wide evaluation, the beef cattle herd of the United States consumes approximately 80% of its nutrients in the form of forages, with just fewer than 20% of the total ration being in the form of concentrate feeds. While the vast majority of the feed consumed by the beef cow herd, preweaned calves, and stockers are forages, forbs or browse; the use of corn in finishing diets provides a natural energy source that can be effectively

used by ruminants without compromising rumen health. Corn, corn silage, and corn byproducts are appropriate for inclusion in a correctly balanced fed-cattle ration.

Additionally, new-generation farming techniques and technologies allow a bushel of corn to be produced with approximately half the nitrogen, phosphate and potash fertilizer as compared to 1980. The use of “on-the-go” technology allows the precision application of fertilizer based on analysis of the plant’s nitrogen status. Continued research will lead to even greater innovations, including slow-release and controlled-released fertilizers. Erosion has largely been eliminated via the use of no-till farming coupled with appropriate use of herbicides and genetically modified plants. In fact, because of technologies and techniques such as these, the American food system is significantly more sustainable.

4. Organic or natural food systems do not provide nutritional enhancements to human beings that exceed that provided by traditional food systems. The American Society for Nutrition reports in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* that there is no evidence to suggest differences in nutrient quality between organically and conventionally produced foods.
5. Families produce the vast majority of America’s food. In fact, 98% of U.S. farms are owned by families, family partnerships or family corporations. These families have adapted to a declining farm population, rising production costs and increasing international competitions by taking advantage of the economies of scale that accompany enterprises that are larger than those managed by our grandfathers. Without increasing farm size, these families would be less able to sustain their businesses. The use of technology allows each farmer and rancher (less than 2% of U.S. population) to feed more than 120 people beyond themselves.
6. Improved nutrition, genetics, animal care and preventative health management allows the beef industry to produce America’s beef supply with 35 million fewer total cattle than was the case in the mid-1970s. At the same time, the industry has a long record of environmental stewardship. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the total U.S. livestock industry accounts for 2.8% of greenhouse gas emissions.

If we are to assure America’s food security then each of us in agriculture must develop our talking points and be prepared to advocate for our businesses and communities. The future of America’s children depends on our ability to be successful in telling the agricultural story.

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