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# Stewardship Strategies

*North and South Dakota among states taking a proactive approach to address society's shifting animal-agriculture concerns.*

by **KINDRA GORDON,**  
*field editor*

Known for wide-open ranch country and fertile cropland, North and South Dakota may seem like an idyllic environment where everyone understands and supports ag producers' efforts. Yet, with America's population increasingly centered in cities and towns, even in rural states like the Dakotas, the agricultural industry has seen a shift in consumer understanding and concern for where their food comes from, how it is produced and by whom.

"Due to the current structure of our society, there are very few of us directly involved in utilizing renewable resources — sunshine, moisture, forage and grain — to produce food. As a result, the vast majority of our population no longer connect or understand the 'culture' that is agriculture," explains Gerald Stokka, as he describes the widening disconnection between rural and urban communities that has intensified during the past decade.

As a livestock stewardship Extension specialist at North Dakota State University, a position that was filled in July 2012, Stokka has been hired to take a proactive approach in assisting North Dakota's livestock producers, primarily beef producers, and the consuming public in understanding one another. Approval for the position was created by an initiative during the 2011 North Dakota legislative session as the state recognized an increasing need to help producers face pressing issues related to livestock stewardship.

Stokka, who is trained as a veterinarian, offers this explanation on the development of the position, "I believe this position was created to help restore trust, respect and communication between agriculture and the consumers of our products."

South Dakota State University is also taking steps to bridge the gap between consumers and livestock producers. In July 2013, a livestock stewardship extension associate position was added to the SDSU

Animal Science Department. Heidi Carroll, who holds a master's degree in ruminant nutrition, fills that position, and says, "Livestock producers are actively making decisions to be responsible stewards of their animals and are taking daily steps to protect the public's food supply. I hope to generate open discussion with the public about how our food is raised."

## Efforts to reconnect

The audiences with whom Stokka and Carroll work of course include producers, veterinarians and others involved in livestock production. Additionally, they are aiming to reach the consuming public with messages about production agriculture.

In communicating with consumers, Stokka says he strives to share information from an objective, scientific standpoint when possible, but he also tries to encompass the passion producers have for what they do.

"Producing food — agriculture — is a culture that deserves all of our respect," he says. "However, we cannot demand respect. In some cases we (agriculture) need to earn it back."

Stokka's initial efforts have included helping audiences in agriculture to understand what stewardship is all about — and asking them for their help in communicating with consumers. Stokka says, "I cannot do this alone. At every opportunity I challenge, yes, even coerce, producers to be willing to take on the challenge of being a spokesperson."

In South Dakota, Carroll is working to offer more quality assurance trainings and organize a stockmanship workshop for producers on livestock handling. She is also providing information to producers through SDSU's iGrow website and webinars.

Carroll adds that building the connection between producers and the public isn't just about what producers need to do. She notes consumers should also seek to build their knowledge.

"Individuals with legitimate concerns about production practices should learn about proper animal production practices from various credible sources," she says. "Initiating one-on-one discussions with experts to gain a better understanding of the specific issue is helpful. Asking a few questions of clarification before socially reacting fosters trust and respect for differing opinions."

## Defining stewardship

As Stokka and Carroll carry the message of livestock stewardship to different audiences, they acknowledge that there are various terms and definitions for the realm that encompasses animal welfare, animal care, stockmanship and stewardship.

"The definition I use and want people to remember is this: Stewardship is the careful and responsible management of things entrusted to one's care," Stokka says. He says that definition is from Webster's dictionary, and he particularly likes the use of the word "entrusted."

He continues, "What are those things entrusted to us in agriculture? They are land, livestock, people. We have a philosophical reason to carefully and responsibly manage these resources. If not us, then who? Only those who have a vested interest, and not just materially, will manage these properly."

Stokka also adds one more item to the list, saying, "We have a responsibility to be stewards of the 'truth.' We can no longer sit back and allow untruths and misleading statements about agriculture, food, diets and the people in our culture to go unchallenged."

Looking to the future, both Stokka and Carroll say their goal in addressing stewardship issues is to be a responsive, knowledgeable resource for the industry, and to help producers lay as much groundwork as possible in educating and earning trust from consumers to stay ahead of issues that impact agriculture.

## What's ahead?

As the livestock industry adjusts to additional emphasis on stewardship, Heidi Carroll, South Dakota State University livestock stewardship extension associate, offers some guidelines.

Foremost, she emphasizes all animal caretakers should continue implementing best-management practices that have been scientifically proven and ethically sound to provide high-quality care to their animals.

Additionally, producers should routinely document their production practices to provide justification of their management practices. Carroll points out that as new audit programs by meat processors or livestock industry organizations are being introduced with the purpose of ensuring humane handling of livestock from birth to death, producer participation in these programs gives confidence to consumers about the safety and wholesomeness of food products at all steps of the food supply chain. These programs also increase transparency of livestock production, which may reaffirm consumer trust in producers, says Carroll.

She adds, "I believe one concern of consumers that may influence livestock production is an increase in employee training requirements. Owners and managers should consider investing in the ongoing education of employees to guarantee animals are consistently handled in the most appropriate manner."

On his view of the future, North Dakota State University's Gerald Stokka encourages other land-grant universities to consider adding a livestock stewardship position to their faculty, particularly someone who has the ability to serve both producers and consumers.

Stokka says his future goals include reaching out to the retail sector and continuing to reach the end consumer with assurances about livestock stewardship practices. He notes that this may require some unique approaches, and he hopes people within the livestock industry will partner with such efforts.

**Editor's Note:** Kindra Gordon is a freelancer and cattlemaster from Whitewood, S.D.

