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Sustainability-**Beef's Opportunity**

Farmers and ranchers are the "original environmentalists," says Debbie Lyons-Blythe, White City, Kan.

Advocates believe beef's story must be shared > BY GREG HENDERSON

"What better proof of sustainability is there than when we can say we are a multi-generation ranch?" asks Debbie Lyons-Blythe, White City, Kan. It's a response she hears often from beef producers when discussing sustainability, and she admits she harbors some of those feelings, too.

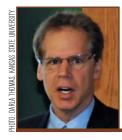
"But we've done a poor job of communicating measures of our sustainability, and we need to be at the table to help shape the discussion," she says.

Raised in a multi-generational ranching family, Lyons-Blythe is a well-known advocate for agriculture through her blog, "Life On A Kansas Cattle Ranch," and as the recipient of Monsanto Company's 2012 America's

Farmers Mom of the Year. She says she learned from her parents—as most ranchers do-to "leave the land better than I found it. We must communicate that philosophy in pictures and images and language that non-ag people will understand."

Wholehearted agreement is found in the corporate boardrooms of many of beef's biggest stakeholders.

"Sustainability is part of growing our business and your business," Bob Langert, McDonald's former



Sustainability is part of growing our business and your business.

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great opportunity to engage consumers and listen to what people want to know."

Fortunately, beef already has a wealth of sustainable talking points, detailed in the checkoff-funded Beef Industry Life Cycle Assessment, released two years ago. That assessment documented a 5% overall

improvement in beef's sustainability during the six years from 2005 to 2011.

The detailed life cycle assessment examined every aspect of beef production, according to the report, from the growth of feed to the disposal of packaging by the final consumer.

In a 2013 news release, the late Richard Gebhart, an Oklahoma rancher who served on the sustainability advisory council said, "We examined all the inputs and outputs required to produce a pound of boneless, edible beef and we did that for the 1970s, 2005 and 2011." The 1970s and 2005 reports each represent major shifts in beef production practices, while 2011 represents present-day practices.

Kim Stackhouse-Lawson, executive director of global sustainability for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, says the beef industry is the first food system to benchmark its current status in a holistic manner that encompasses all three aspect of sustainability.

The life cycle assessment, Stackhouse-Lawson says, helps producers recognize "how management changes over time have improved the sustainability of beef and utilize that knowledge to produce more sustainable beef in the future."

The research included an evaluation of thousands of data points to quantify the industry's progress since 2005. By documenting that progress, the beef industry

vice-president of sustainability, told cattlemen in Manhattan, Kan., earlier this year. He says McDonald's sustainability initiative is driven by consumers, not activists. As the chief architect of McDonald's sustainability project, Langert helped develop plans for the company to begin sourcing "verified sustainable beef" beginning in 2016.

"We didn't create sustainable beef on a whim," he says. "Beef is who we are." McDonald's sustainability initiative is an effort to make beef more "attractive and relevant" to modern consumers. "People want to eat food they feel good about," he adds.

Langert's language can sometimes raise eyebrows among cattle producers, especially those who wonder how sustainability will be defined in McDonald's corporate boardroom. However, Langert says McDonald's definition dovetails with the beef industry's definition of sustainability: "balancing environmental

responsibility, economic opportunity and social diligence." The short-hand version of that definition is: people, planet and profit.

Still skeptical? Joan Ruskamp, who owns and manages J & S Feedlot in Dodge, Neb., with her husband Jeff, challenges you to view the movement as an opportunity, not a threat.

"Agriculture must be sustainable to survive," Ruskamp says. "It's the responsible use of resources to produce food in an acceptable way. Our sustainability record is a



Beef's sustainability record offers "a great opportunity to engage consumers," says Joan Ruskamp, J & S Feedlot, Dodge, Neb.

can for the first time provide science-based answers to questions about its sustainability. Stackhouse-Lawson also sees the industry's sustainability initiative as an opportunity for cattlemen.

"Producers want to do what is best for the environment, best for the cattle and economically sustainable," she says. "Ultimately, improvements in efficiency are the main driver of change in sustainability. Adoption of more sustainable production practices also makes good business sense."

Beef's sustainability advancements have come through innovations such as higher crop yields, better irrigation, innovations in the packing sector, improvements in technology and better animal performance.

Stackhouse-Lawson says the project was extensive. "We examined millions of individual data points and then created models to simulate specific aspects of beef production practices so that this data and these results are truly representative of beef production in the U.S."

The findings of beef's life cycle assessment revealed gains in all three components of sustainability—people, planet and profit. A 7% improvement was documented in both beef's social and environmental sustainability, while a 6% gain was found in economic impact.

The assessment reviewed aspects of the beef life cycle at every phase of both pre- and post-harvest production. The largest improvement in a category between 2005 and 2011 came in occupational illnesses and accidents, which declined 32%, primarily due to a decline in occupational accidents and illnesses in the packing sector.

Improvements in production efficiencies and beef quality will be muted, however, if beef producers don't effectively tell their story.

"We've got to show people that we care about the environment and our animals," Lyons-Blythe says. "We've been practicing good stewardship for generations, and we are sustainable, but we must tell our story, too."

At the national level, Stackhouse-Lawson says a strategy to engage consumers is in place. "Through the

checkoff-funded reputation management program, NCBA is working as a contractor to the beef checkoff to communicate beef sustainability through social media and on-farm immersion experiences aimed at retail, food service and health professionals who are increasingly interested in the sustainability of food," she says.

But you shouldn't rely solely on a national organization to tell beef's story. Ruskamp believes producers should communicate "wherever we are," including public speaking when you travel or through social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

"Sustainability is different for every producer," Ruskamp says. "It can be harder for consumers to understand how our feedlot is sustainable when compared to cows on grass. I tell people we care for the cattle just like it was a hotel. We give them the best room and the best food we can while they are here. We're hotel stewards. People seem to grasp that concept."

Lyons-Blythe helps underscore her multigenerational passion for farming and ranching and its sustainability with consumers by asking, "What other occupation can boast the children wanting to follow in the footsteps of their parents and grandparents into the same job in the same location?"

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Sustainability: This is the first of a four-part series on sustainability and the beef industry. Next month: The three legs of sustainability – social, environmental and economic.