

The Crossroads of Beef Sustainability

Cattle producers take it for granted, because it's their livelihood and their legacy. Meanwhile, the rest of society is scratching their heads, asking: 'Just how sustainable is beef production?'

by **John Robinson**, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Beef sustainability is garnering more attention than ever before. Consumers are increasingly attached to how their food is produced, and it's changing how beef is viewed around the globe. The increasing attention from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the fact that consumer perceptions of sustainability are seen as a limiter of beef demand, has prompted beef producers everywhere to work proactively to address potential concerns.

For years beef producers have talked about the need to tell their story, but they often lacked the scientific evidence necessary to be credible to their industry's detractors. The publication of *Livestock's Long Shadow* by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization in 2006 spurred the Beef Checkoff Program to fund the Beef Industry Life Cycle Assessment (LCA). This innovative work was the largest LCA ever conducted on a food commodity, and it positioned the industry to lead conversations about the sustainability of beef.

The beef industry LCA, which was completed and third-party certified by ISO Inc. in 2013, showed a 7% improvement in the environmental and social sustainability of the beef value chain. The assessment, which examined the economic, social and environmental components of beef, demonstrated to industry stakeholders that the work they have been doing for generations has put them on a sustainable path of continuous improvement.

"The completion of the LCA allows us

to demonstrate, using science, that the beef industry is on a good path and has been for many years," says Kim Stackhouse-Lawson, director of sustainability research at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). "Furthermore, it also showed us where we can best concentrate our efforts in the future to continue our improvement."

A path of continuous improvement

The science of sustainability is still relatively young and changes continuously as researchers find new ways to measure the individual components that drive the three accepted pillars of sustainability — the environmental, economic and social aspects of an industry's footprint.

"For many years, much external focus was placed on the environmental sustainability of the beef industry, but that's not really the right approach for anyone if we're going to achieve meaningful, long-term improvements in sustainability for our industry or any other," says Stackhouse-Lawson. "In order to improve the sustainability of the beef value chain, or any other product, improvements must be balanced so, for example, a gain in environmental sustainability doesn't negatively impact the economic sustainability of beef."

She explains that maintaining that balance is critical to the sustainability community and those who are serious about making improvements to how beef is produced globally.

"We've heard a great deal about an improvement in one area or another that [is] being pushed by those outside the beef community, but when you look at a lot of those suggestions or improvements, you find they take a top-down approach and result in a negative impact elsewhere in the chain, and those approaches really don't improve the sustainability of beef," she says. "That's how NCBA and the beef checkoff arrived at their definitions of sustainability, which require meeting the growing global demand for beef by balancing environmental, economic and social metrics throughout the supply chain."

Stackhouse-Lawson emphasizes that the science of sustainability is still young and changing.

"How the sustainability of an industry is measured is still changing, and the science behind it is improving rapidly," she says. "It isn't just the science that's changing. We're also seeing the conversation change as the topic takes center stage around the globe. There are many efforts under way to document and improve beef sustainability, and, as that happens, the conversation has really started to coalesce around a balanced approach to continuous improvement."

She points out the efforts of the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (GRSB), which will be releasing its principles and criteria for defining sustainable beef on a global scale this fall. That effort, which has been ongoing for three years, has been a multi-stakeholder process that includes a wide range of interests — from beef producers and processors to NGOs, restaurants and retailers from around the world.

"We are very close to a framework for defining beef sustainability for the entire global beef community, and it's that effort and the cooperation from all corners of



the industry that will help beef producers redefine sustainability for our industry,” says Stackhouse-Lawson.

However, GRBSB’s efforts to define sustainable beef around the world may not be enough to satisfy all of the questions about beef. How continuous improvement will be made is to be left to a series of regional and national efforts that will work on a more local scale to help individual producers identify

**Sustainability defined:
A sustainable U.S. beef
industry is one in which the
full value chain is able to
balance economic viability,
environmental stewardship
and social responsibility
while meeting the growing
global demand for beef.**

and implement practices that can have the greatest impact in their own operations.

“We’ve really worked hard to prevent a one-size-fits-all approach to beef sustainability, both in the U.S. and at the global level. When others start trying to dictate which practices are more or less sustainable, then we will have a problem,” says Stackhouse-Lawson. “What will work well to improve the sustainability of an individual operation in Texas won’t necessarily work in California or Florida. When you expand that example to a global scale, it really magnifies the complexities of the beef value chain, and it shows just how complex this subject is. It also demonstrates how difficult it is to make large-scale improvements with sweeping mandates.”

There’s no stopping change

It may be clear to those inside the beef industry that change is slow in coming and improvements difficult to come by. For those outside the industry, that hasn’t always been acknowledged. Increasingly, changes are being encouraged by members within the supply chain. Earlier this year, McDonald’s announced that by 2016 it would begin sourcing a portion of its global beef needs from suppliers verified to be sustainable. When the announcement was made, there was no framework to verify a beef supply chain as sustainable, and there were many questions about how the company planned to achieve its goals.

In August, another global food giant, Nestlé, announced it had partnered with World Animal Protection, an animal-welfare

Nestlé announces farm animal welfare commitment

Nestlé is first major food company to form an international partnership with an animal-welfare NGO.

Nestlé has announced a major pledge to improve the welfare of the farm animals in its supply chain, following the signature of a partnership agreement with nongovernmental organization (NGO) World Animal Protection. The agreement means that the hundreds of thousands of farms that supply Nestlé with its dairy, meat, poultry and eggs will have to comply with tighter animal-welfare standards.

Nestlé, with its global purchasing footprint, also becomes the first major food company to form an international partnership with an animal-welfare NGO.

Nestlé has some 7,300 suppliers from whom it buys animal-derived products directly — everything from milk for its range of yogurts and ice creams to meat for its chilled foods and eggs for its fresh pastry and pasta.

Each of these suppliers, in turn, buys from others, meaning that Nestlé’s Responsible Sourcing Guidelines apply to literally hundreds of thousands of farms around the world.

“We know that our consumers care about the welfare of farm animals and we, as a company, are committed to ensuring the highest possible levels of farm animal welfare across our global supply chain,” said Benjamin Ware, the company’s manager of responsible sourcing.

World Animal Protection has been working with Nestlé on how to specifically tighten and improve the *Nestlé Responsible Sourcing Guideline*, which all suppliers must adhere to as part of the Nestlé Supplier Code. Both of these build upon the “Nestlé Commitment on Farm Animal Welfare.”

These now include, for example, spacing requirements for the rearing pens of certain species of animals, such as pigs and cows, to ensure they are not cramped and can engage in normal animal behavior.

In addition, following the involvement of World Animal Protection, Nestlé’s guidelines also seek to minimize pain for farm animals by using veterinary practices that reduce pain, or avoiding the practices in the first place by implementing different animal husbandry practices. An example would be the dehorning of cows.

Nestlé has commissioned an independent auditor, SGS, to carry out checks to ensure the new standards of animal welfare are met on its supplying farms. In 2014, several hundred farm assessments have already been carried out worldwide. Some of these checks are also attended, unannounced, by World Animal Protection representatives whose role is to verify the auditors.

When a violation is identified, Nestlé will work with the supplier to improve the treatment of farm animals to ensure they meet the required standards. If, despite engagement and guidance from Nestlé, the company is unable or unwilling to show improvement, it will no longer supply Nestlé.

The World Animal Protection agreement forms part of Nestlé’s broader *Responsible Sourcing* activities. These cover human rights, health and safety and environmental issues, and build upon multiple commitments, including, for example, a pledge that by the end of next year, 40% of the company’s key commodities — including meat, poultry, eggs and dairy — will be fully traceable.

This article is from Nestlé.

NGO, to enhance its commitment to animal welfare in its supply chain and as a part of its commitment to sustainability (see sidebar “Nestlé Announces Farm Animal Welfare Commitment”). Nestlé is one of the largest producers of prepared foods in the world, with an estimated 7,300 suppliers and hundreds of farms in its production chain.

“We know that our consumers care about the welfare of farm animals and we, as a company, are committed to ensuring the highest possible levels of farm animal welfare across our global supply chain,” said Benjamin Ware, Nestlé’s manager of responsible sourcing, as part of the announcement.

Nestlé says it will support and implement actions to promote animal health and welfare and eliminate certain practices, with an initial focus in the beef supply chain on “dehorning,

tail docking, disbudding and castration without anesthetic and analgesia, veal crates, [and] permanent tethering.”

Nestlé also will “engage with our supply chain partners to establish traceability of the animal-derived materials,” sourced by the company, according to the release.

With announcements such as those from McDonald’s and Nestlé, it is clear that conversations about beef industry sustainability aren’t going away, but perhaps they are beginning to shift to include a more holistic view of the elements that play into determining sustainability.

That’s good news, says Stackhouse-Lawson, who is also an expert on animal health and welfare.

“Animal health and welfare is a critical component of the conversation about

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sustainability, and we have a great story to tell in the United States,” she says. “The work we’ve already done to benchmark the sustainability of our production chain includes components of animal health and welfare in each pillar.”

For example, Stackhouse-Lawson explains that the demonstrated 10% reduction in emissions to water between 2005 and 2011 is partially a result of improvements in efficiency. While that may not sound like it’s tied to animal welfare, she points out that producers in the United States are among the world’s best in the care and feeding of their animals.

“We’ve seen tremendous improvements in the efficiency of our herd in this country. That’s due, in large part, to the fact that we make major investments to improve the health and welfare of our cattle,” she explains. “In the cow-calf producer sector, we have worked to make improvements in genetics, and that helps our animals perform better in a variety of climates. We’ve selected animals for disease and parasite resistance, and that has contributed to our efficiency; and we’ve certainly improved our performance on feed through a number of factors from selection



to feeding, and that contributes to improved efficiency. When we improve our animal health and welfare, we also improve our efficiency by reducing the use of resources from grain, grass and water to fuel and

fertilizer. All of that helps contribute to a more sustainable industry.”

She also points to the installation of improved handling facilities and implementation of better welfare practices, many of which are based on the recommendations of experts such as Temple Grandin, at feedlots and packing plants as efforts that directly contribute to industry sustainability.

“We know that consumers see animal welfare and the overall image of the beef industry as a potential limiter of beef demand, so improvements that benefit consumer perception have a direct tie to continuous improvement,” says Stackhouse-Lawson. “It may be that NGOs are bringing some of these issues and changes to the forefront, but our own research shows that our consumers, particularly millennial consumers, expect us to implement these practices because it’s the right thing to do.”



Editor’s Note: John Robinson is senior director of organizational communications for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association. This article was written upon request and for the Angus Journal.