



Sustainability Assurance

If you make your living at the end of a dirt road, you likely don't need to be schooled in sustainability. That's especially true if you're the flag-bearer of a multi-generational farming or ranching family. It's a solid argument from cowboys: If raising cattle wasn't sustainable, you wouldn't still live at the end of that dirt road you call home.

Yet, the concept of sustainability will become increasingly important to the success of your business. Consumers—many of whom have never been to the end of a dirt road—want to know more about where their food comes from and how it is raised.

Over the past four months, Beef Today's series on sustainability describes some of the initiatives by stakeholders, from ranchers to retailers, that document and highlight your story to consumers. It's an effort that's quickly gaining traction as some of America's biggest names in the food business—McDonald's, Wal-Mart, Tyson and Cargill, for instance—are in the process of implementing sustainability programs that show consumers they care about people, animals and the environment.

Industry leaders, however, say a significant stumbling block for sustainability initiatives is producer indifference—not to sustainability itself, but to the suggestion that producers need to verify or document sustainability practices on their ranch or feedlot.

That's an objection Debbie Lyons-Blythe says she hears often from cattlemen and women when discussing sustainability, and she admits she harbors some of those same feelings, too. 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 Farm Mom of the Year.

"We've done a poor job of com-

municating measures of our sustainability," Lyons-Blythe says, "and we need to be at the table to help shape the discussion. We must communicate [sustainability] in pictures and images and language that non-ag people will understand."

Such sentiments are echoed in board rooms across America from corporate executives seeking better ways to market your products. For instance, former McDonald's vice-president of sustainability Bob Langert says, "Sustainability is part of growing our business and your business." He says McDonald's sustainability initiative is driven by consumers, not activists. Decisively, he says, "People want to eat food they feel good about."

Helping people feel good about eating beef is the goal of sustainability initiatives. Cattlemen can feel good knowing such initiatives help solidify their image as caretakers of animals and stewards of the land.

Over the past several years, beef producers embraced an industry-wide initiative to provide packers and retailers with valuable information supporting claims that beef is a safe and wholesome product. That initiative is Beef Quality Assurance (BQA), a producer education and certification program designed to raise awareness and improve techniques of animal health and animal care practices. In short, BQA lends credibility to the fact you strive to produce the best beef possible.

America's farmers and ranchers must now embrace sustainability with the same enthusiasm. You're likely already operating a sustainable operation with benefits for people, planet and profit, but now it's time to offer your "sustainability assurance" to American consumers.



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