



Sustainability: new term, traditional values

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Sustainability. It's the new buzz-word in every restaurant menu, every corporate mission statement and every TV commercial. If we believe articles in *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine or other popular press, sustainability can be only achieved through eating grass-fed, locally-produced, organic beef, preferably that which you have slaughtered yourself.

There's a market for every production system within the U.S. beef industry, but, to suggest that only a small proportion of the industry is sustainable does an injustice to all. Coined by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, the most widely-used definition of sustainability is that it "*meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*". The presence of 5th, 6th and 7th generation ranchers and farmers within the industry clearly shows that through producing sufficient safe, affordable beef to feed the past, current and future population while taking care of land and water resources, the beef industry is an excellent example of sustainability in action.

Sustainability can further be broken down into three components: environmental stewardship, economic viability, and social responsibility. Environmentally, beef producers have made amazing advances over the past 30 years – compared to 1977, 19% less feed, 12% less water, 9% less fossil fuels and 33% less land is required to produce a pound of beef – leading to a 16% decrease in beef's carbon footprint.

Through gains in productivity and efficiency, beef is an affordable economic choice for consumers, allowing our families, children and grandchildren to enjoy high-quality animal protein that supports healthy bodies. Socially, beef producers are an intrinsic part of rural communities, contributing to the rural economy and promoting development through providing employment to ranch and feedlot workers as well as veterinarians, nutritionists, feed mills and allied industry professionals. These contributions were documented in the first NCBA Corporate and Social Responsibility Report published last year¹.

Differing priorities are one of the major problems in defining a sustainable system. Knowing that beef has been produced in a manner that is economically efficient for the rancher is not a top priority for an urban consumer, even though this is an essential part of ensuring that ranchers can continue to supply food to the consumer. Instead, consumers want to know that their food is safe, and produced in a way that preserves the natural resources that we all share.

Likewise, the successful rancher does not view protecting the environment as a separate part

of their business, but it is an intrinsic part of protecting the environmental resources that they steward. The most successful beef producers can only continue at that level if they are also protecting the environment. The success of NCBA's Environmental Stewardship program² is a clear example of the importance of this facet of sustainability. In a very real way, urban consumers and successful farmers share the same priorities; they merely emphasize different areas.

This is a challenge that we cannot afford to brush under the carpet - issues relating to resource use, greenhouse gas emissions, animal welfare and food safety are not going to go away. For example, whether or not we believe that the carbon footprint of beef is going to have a significant effect on future climate change, retailers, consumers and policy-makers consider it to be extremely important. Indeed, retailers and food companies are starting to quantify the sustainability of their products, and will make that information as transparent and understandable as possible.

Unless we make a clear commitment to quantifying our carbon footprint, assessing the management practices that will reduce it and communicating to all food production stakeholders that we are dedicated to sustainability, the anti-animal agriculture activists will be happy to instead produce data to "show" that beef production is not sustainable. The threat is not confined to activist groups – an investment company recently ran an ad in mainstream media suggesting that it takes 635 gallons of water to make a hamburger, almost 6 times greater than scientific analysis from researchers at UC Davis³ has shown. This was due to misinformation rather than malice, yet is clear evidence of the need for solid numbers that are based on science.

As consumers continue to take an interest in the way that their food is produced, we have to focus on promoting the many ways in which beef production is sustainable. We need to continue to look for ways to produce more beef using fewer resources, and to adapt to increasing resource constraints in sustainable ways. That means facing up to the challenge, being proactive in assessing sustainability metrics and continually improving what the industry has always done best – producing safe, affordable, environmentally-friendly beef.

To learn more about the recent sustainability webinar hosted by *Drovers CattleNetwork*, [click here](#)

¹ NCBA. 2011. The Cattlemen's Stewardship Review: Connecting Our Vision and Values. Available at: <http://www.explorebeef.org/StewardshipReview.aspx>

² NCBA. 2012. Environmental Stewardship Program & Award. Available at: <http://www.environmentalstewardship.org/>

³Beckett, J. L., and J. W. Oltjen. 1993. Estimation of the water requirement for beef production in the United States. *J. Anim. Sci.* 71: 818-826.

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