

Industry Concerns

Consumers of beef products and beef producers share an interest in the future of cattle production. Consumers are often concerned about how cattle are raised and how cattle production methods will affect the beef they consume. Producers are working to correct misconceptions about the beef industry by educating the public.

Consumer Concerns

Over the last several years, American consumers have become increasingly concerned with food safety, environmental awareness, the ethics of beef cattle production, and animal rights.

Lack of food safety is one of the American consumer's greatest fears. Most concerns revolve around bacterial and chemical contamination of the food supply. Highly publicized incidences of food safety and food preparation shortcomings have caused anxiety about the safety of beef. For example, cases in which people have become ill and even died because of E. coli bacteria in undercooked hamburger have increased fears among consumers. Consumers are also uneasy about the possible contamination of meat by residues from antibiotics and growth hormones given to beef cattle.

A growing concern of the American public is the impact of beef cattle production on the environment. Over the last 30 years, preservation of the environment has become an increasingly important issue in the United States. Consumers are especially concerned with waste management and the potential for contamination of water from the runoff of cattle waste into rivers, lakes, and streams. Many people are also concerned about the overgrazing of public lands in the western United States.

The ethics of livestock producers are also coming under attack by consumers. Unethical practices, especially those involving showing activities, have been brought to the attention of the American public. One problem is the ownership of animals by adults who allow young people to show them. Many people view this practice as unfair to junior producers who have to purchase or raise their animals themselves. The illegal use of steroids to enhance performance is a second issue of concern to consumers.

Another area of interest to the American public is the ongoing debate over animal rights. Some groups, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA),

believe that all animals have the same rights as human beings. They feel that humans do not have the right to use animals as resources. These groups oppose agricultural practices that they believe limit an animal's right to live freely. Activists have carried out many protests, mailings, and demonstrations against animal agriculture. Large livestock shows and fairs are favorite sites of demonstrations by animal rights activists.

Animal Rights and Animal Welfare

As described in the preceding paragraph, animal rights activists believe that animals, like human beings, have rights, and they should not be used for food or research. Activists view castration, dehorning, and vaccination as inhumane. These practices are objectionable because they alter the animal from its original state and because many are done without anesthetics.

Because of the controversy over animal rights, the term animal welfare causes many producers to become uneasy and upset. However, a clear distinction between animal rights and animal welfare should be made. Animal welfare involves a concern for the well-being of animals used by humans. People with an interest in animal welfare believe that animals should have all their needs met in a comfortable environment. The producer is responsible for providing the necessary food and shelter.

Most, if not all, producers are in fact concerned with animal welfare. The welfare of animals affects their growth and production, which ultimately affects the profits received by the producers. The key to addressing this issue is to continue educating both consumers and producers so no grounds exist for making allegations of abuse and mistreatment of animals in agriculture.

Addressing Consumer Concerns

The beef producer might ask, "Why should I be concerned with what the American public thinks?" The obvious answer is that the public consists of the customers for agricultural products. The old saying that the customer is always right still applies.

In response to public concerns, local, state, and national cattlemen's associations have developed voluntary programs that focus on correcting practices that might trouble consumers. One such program, sponsored by

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the Missouri Cattlemen's Association, is the Beef Quality Assurance Program. The goal of the program is to make producers aware of issues that affect the safety and wholesomeness of beef. The Beef Quality Assurance Program aims at educating producers about proper management practices, proper record keeping for drug usage, and details about various growth hormones and vaccines used in beef cattle production. Producers are also informed about the correct usage, dosage, and withdrawal times for hormones and vaccines.

In addition, the USDA has an inspection program aimed at reducing bacterial contamination to address concerns about food safety. Rather than using a visual inspection, inspectors will look at bacteria counts by taking swabs of the surface of the carcass and growing bacterial cultures.

Industry associations also seek to emphasize to consumers the safety of beef production for the environment and encourage environmental awareness among producers. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association presents several Environmental Stewardship Awards annually to producers who use innovative methods to protect natural resources. In addition, the Association's publications for consumers emphasize that beef production is environmentally friendly. For example, they point out that production primarily takes place outside in unconfined settings. This practice spreads the cattle waste over the ground where it is recycled as fertilizer.

A major focus of many 4-H and FFA leaders has been to educate young people and their parents on the damaging impact of unethical showing practices. The emphasis has been on zero tolerance. The Missouri State Fair has adopted the National Code of Show Ring Ethics formulated by the International Association of Fairs and Expositions. Exhibitors must sign a form that guarantees that they will not violate the code, which includes provisions about ownership and drug use in animals. If they do, they forfeit any prizes won and may be barred from exhibiting their animals.

Industry associations have emphasized the importance of animal welfare to both producers and consumers. The Beef Quality Assurance Program gives guidelines on how to handle and care for animals. The Missouri Beef Quality Assurance Program manual includes a Code of Ethics that stresses the humane treatment of cattle. Producers have relied on these industry associations to get the

word out to consumers that beef producers care for the welfare of their animals. Many consumers are unaware of the radical ideas of many animal rights supporters. They often withdraw support from such groups once they understand them.

Summary

Consumers are increasingly concerned with food safety, environmental safety, producer ethics, and animal welfare. Recent concerns are being addressed by educating producers and consumers. Producers are actively working to provide a positive image of beef and beef production.

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