

The Future of Beef – Environmental Issues for Beef

By Kris Ringwall
Extension Beef Specialist
NDSU Extension Service



Environmental issues were one of seven identified by the Farm Foundation as it partnered with private and public organizations to take a look into the future of animal agriculture.

In the final report, Charles Abdalla and Jennifer Lawton, writing in “Consumer Issues and Demand,” published by the American Agricultural Economics Association’s online Choices magazine (www.choicesmagazine.org, Volume 21, No. 3, 2006), concluded their discussion regarding the current situation with these words, “... the relatively low rate of adoption of technology”

The discussion prior to this phrase was made in reference to the production of methane. Abdalla and Lawton made the point that livestock operations potentially impact water quality through manure, bedding, spilled feed and dead animals. The pair also noted that air quality potentially can be impacted by the increased confinement of animals. Increased confinement also can increase odor and dust, which has the potential of creating bioaerosols that could lead to human and animal disease.

Eyebrows get raised from the simple insert “... the relatively low rate of adoption of technology” The implication is that the industry is not responding to noted concerns. A roar will go up from those who simply prefer things to be left as they are.

The next generations of beef producers need to think about a future that grasps hold of and evaluates the whole picture. Only when the big picture is viewed can plans be made to adjust or at least acknowledge roadblocks.

The discussion by Abdalla and Lawton revealed some of the forces that may change animal agriculture as we know it today. They noted that the industry has become more concentrated, which has created specialization. This specialization may create regional clusters of activity that can have negative environmental impacts. These impacts, although initially environmental, eventually become the question and create uncertainty about human health impacts, along with appropriate perceptions of beef production.

The paradox in the beef management change is that the out-migration of individual producers and their enterprises ultimately has resulted in the remaining individual

producers operating larger beef operations and increasing the potential for the concentration of beef cattle. History has shown that producers involved in the industry find the acceptance of problems resulting in their growth difficult to accept.

Denial of potential problems accomplishes nothing. The actual concentration of cattle and associated impacts need to be accounted for in future planning.

Abdalla and Lawton point out that weak federal leadership and/or policy implementation failures, along with environmental activism and changing information technology, have significant potential impacts on the future of all animal production. These impacts interact within a world of litigation that further provides opportunities to strengthen public-sector roles, enhance legal reform and sort out public/private cooperation. At best, all of these scenarios tend to make quick, short-term thoughts stretch into long, cumbersome processes.

A simple change may not be simple at all and, in some cases, simply stagnate with no outcome. On a more hands-on approach, the future does extend great opportunities in technological advances in waste management and environment monitoring.

These advances can increase producer capacity to strengthen and expand beef/annual/perennial forage production systems and target best management practices of the highest priority to address environmental concerns. All in all, these programs are not simple and the players are often imposing, maybe even demanding.

Old neighbors are old neighbors, but the new neighbors may or may not view the world the same as those who have invested their lives in beef production. It is important to remember that answers can be found, provided the ears are not sealed before the questions are even asked.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1041 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0327.

Potential Forces of Environmental Change

- Industry concentration and specialization may increase human health concerns.
- Soft leadership, policy implementation failures, environmental activism and changing information technology produce uncertainty.
- Litigation provides opportunities to initiate legal reform and sort out public/private cooperation.
- Technological advances in waste management and environment monitoring can guide best management practices.

Adapted from Charles Abdalla and Jennifer Lawton,
(www.choicesmagazine.org, Volume 21, No. 3, 2006)