

The Future of Beef – Food Safety and Animal Health Issues

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What issue is front and center in the beef industry?

I am sure there could be several answers to the question; however, many would quickly answer food safety and animal health.

A day does not go by without significant print focused on the ramifications of eating food. Most of the print (and food) is good, but even the hint of a problem and it becomes huge.

We live in a fast-paced world with high expectations. Even as this article was being prepared, I opened CattleNetwork (www.cattlenetwork.com), a provider of Internet news, and the lead topic was “CTN: 11 Sickened By E. Coli Outbreak In New Jersey.”

Today’s beef producers have had many a discussion that was focused on the relationship between producers and consumers. Despite the rhetoric, numerous points and counterpoints, the conclusion usually is the same: Consumers eat beef and pay the bills, so we need to be customer sensitive and deliver high quality food.

Beef is not alone. The recent E. coli outbreaks certainly confirm that all food is potentially at risk. The consumer’s thoughts are with the whole market and require safe food. The producer’s ability to supply a reputable, wholesome product (beef or any other consumable foodstuff) is critical.

Food safety and animal health is one of seven issues 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, H.L. Goodwin Jr., F. Dustin Clark, Dawn Thilmany and Sandra J. Hamm, writing in “Policies to Protect Food Safety and Animal Health,” published by the American Agricultural Economics Association’s online Choices magazine (www.choicesmagazine.org, Volume 21, No. 3, 2006), noted at the outset that “Protecting food safety and animal health is critical for maintaining public health, consumer confidence, and profitability of animal agriculture.”

The group went on to say that “Driving forces in food safety and animal health across North America include questions about feed additives, biotechnology, food borne diseases, links between animal and human diseases, and

traceability.” Does that not sound a lot like our current industry?

As the industry grows or at least shifts to meet the future needs of not only North America, but across the world, the demand for animal food production is increasing. The pressure to meet this demand, as well as keep costs low, has pushed for more confined, concentrated and intensified systems throughout the world.

These systems are not fundamentally bad, but the fact remains: Intensification, concentration, extensive shipping and the need for speed all require increased efforts to keep foodborne microbial pathogens in check. The caution seems rather bold, but as Goodwin and associates point out, involvement for the public good for all of North America is critical.

The group listed several critical areas: establishing coordinating mechanisms for food safety and animal health; strengthening basic research efforts; developing wide diagnostics, monitoring and surveillance networks; enhancing rapid and widespread information dissemination; increasing public food-animal veterinarians; encouraging the development of new scientific technology for enhanced animal disease prevention, detection and diagnosis; and establishing an indemnity insurance for animal agriculture. These issues are very important pieces that need to be implemented in this country and all of North America.

Food safety is not a local issue. Food safety involves more than individual producers. Today’s lifestyles continue to place pressure on all concerned to meet the expectations of providing food to maintain those lifestyles.

But, as is so often the case, the buck stops where it all starts, the producer. For the producer, there is no simple answer.

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 BT0330.

Future Food Safety and Animal Health Needs

- **coordinating mechanisms for food safety and animal health**
- **strengthening basic research**
- **developing wide diagnostics, monitoring and surveillance networks**
- **enhancing rapid and widespread information dissemination**
- **increasing public food-animal veterinarians**
- **enhancing animal disease prevention, detection and diagnosis**
- **establishing an indemnity insurance for animal agriculture**

Adapted from H.L. Goodwin, Jr., F. Dustin Clark, Dawn Thilmany and Sandra J. Hamm
(www.choicesmagazine.org, Volume 21, No. 3, 2006)