Livestock Production

Beef industry benefits environment

EFFICIENT cattlemen and women are a boon for the environment. I am absolutely not anti-grass-fed beef. There is a place for every single kind of system: grass-fed, grain-fed, local, organic and so on. What I am “anti” is mis-marketing, and the perceptions that are passed on to the consumer about what is and isn’t environmentally friendly.

From farm publications and The Wall Street Journal to Cosmopolitan and mainstream women’s magazines, there is a constant stream of information about water, land and resource use. Beef is often held under the microscope.

In every part of the world, we’re going to face the issues of feeding more people on less land with fewer resources. Estimates are that by 2050, worldwide population will increase by 50% — and we’ll need 70% more food to support that.

On a global basis, people are going to have greater incomes. As people have more money, they want more meat, more milk and more eggs.

Meatless Mondays

Today’s conversations about sustainability are well-founded, but some of the proposed solutions are not. Take “Meatless Mondays,” for example. Even if we all went meatless every Monday, if we only ate lentils and tofu and magically didn’t give off any methane ourselves, it’s going to cut our national carbon footprint by less than half a percent.

And then there are other important considerations — like where would animal byproducts such as leather, tallow and pharmaceuticals come from? Instead, increase efficiency. If we can have our animals on the planet for fewer days before they’re harvested, in total we use less energy, less land and less water per unit of beef. For example, in 1977 it took five animals to produce the same number of pounds of beef that it takes four animals to produce today.

Beef yield over that time has gone up fairly consistently, but carcasses can’t keep getting bigger because of consumer acceptance and processing challenges. What we can do is improve productivity and growth rate.

The efficiency gains from 1977 to 2010 amount to a 19-percentage-point reduction in feed use, a 12-point decrease in water needed and a 33-point drop in land required per pound of beef.

That’s not because ranchers and feedlot operators have implemented specific environmental technologies. It’s because they’ve been doing what they do best: improve productivity. Yet that story hasn’t caught on.

Grass vs. conventional

The consumer often hears that grass-fed must be best. But my research team analyzed and compared the environmental impact of three beef production systems: conventional, natural and grass-fed.

Conventional systems, with their growth-enhancing technologies like implants and ionophores, versus natural production: Cattle in the latter system take more days to finish. Animals that grow faster and weigh more cut the environmental impact. That’s magnified and compared the environmental impact of three beef production systems: conventional, natural and grass-fed.

A guest editor who spoke at the recent Wall Street Journal Conference in Sunriver, Ore., showed that 94% of worldwide consumers either support or are neutral toward the use of technology in food production.

Most consumers just want affordable, safe, nutritious food that tastes good.

Capper is a Washington State University animal scientist who spoke at the recent Certified Angus Beef LLC Annual Conference in Sammamish, One.

Reproduction option

Only about 86% of cows have a live calf every year. If that was 90%, 95% or 99%, that would make a huge improvement in productivity. If we improve our land, better grasses, better feed, those animals are going to grow faster.

Good news is found in a recent study showing that 94% of worldwide consumers either support or are neutral toward the use of technology in food production.

Ranchers, stockers and feeders need to keep getting better, and to keep talking about it. It’s important to keep having healthier animals. They’re going to gain better and grow faster.

J. Cappar