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Photos available: <http://www.cabpartners.com/news/photos/JohnS023.jpg>
<http://dl.dropbox.com/u/1415343/capper04.jpg>
<http://dl.dropbox.com/u/1415343/Gary%20Smith.jpg>

Sustainable technology to feed the world

A question must be understood before it can be answered. Meat industry leaders kept that in mind as they looked at consumer concerns regarding technology, sustainability and food choices last month.

The session on “Technology: Handling the Food Demands of a Growing World,” was in conjunction with the annual Reciprocal Meat Conference June 23 in Lubbock, Texas. Elanco Animal Health, the American Meat Science Association and Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) were hosts.

“Agriculture is at another of its crossroads,” said Mark McCully, CAB assistant vice president for supply. “A growing global population requires a dramatic increase in production of wholesome and nutritious food. Technology is the logical way to meet this demand. But discussion of ‘sustainable food’ within our society seems to be centered on production practices of more than 50 years ago.”

That’s looking the wrong way. Alex Bjork, Agriculture World Wildlife Fund agriculture program officer, highlighted some projected changes for the world by 2050. Population is expected to exceed nine billion people, who will need three times the amount of food currently available. That food will have to be produced with diminishing natural resources such as water and land.

“Sustainability is the balancing of three ‘P’s’ – People, Planet and Profit,” Bjork said.

People need to change their perspective to think of sustainability as an entire process. “When considering the amount of water that goes into a latte, you have to account for the water to produce the milk, coffee, cup, lid and energy,” he pointed out.

Jude Capper, Washington State University dairy scientist, said that, compared to natural and grass-fed beef production options, grain feeding technology has the least environmental impact because it is the most efficient. It requires fewer cattle on less land with lower energy and water inputs, she said, and that allows for the smallest carbon footprint.

Safety is one of many factors consumers consider when purchasing beef. Gary Smith, distinguished professor at Colorado State University, pinpointed some consumer concerns about antibiotics and hormones and how they can be addressed.

“Conventional beef technology production systems are not only equal in food safety when compared to natural or organic systems, they have even proven to be safer,” Smith said.

According to a Canadian government report, natural and organic food products are eight times more likely to be recalled than conventional food products. Research reviews on beef hormones showed their presence in food products is miniscule. Ice cream contains 274 times more estrogen than a three-ounce steak from an implanted steer, Smith noted.

The second half of the conference approached sustainability from a consumer's standpoint. John Stika, CAB president, concentrated on the challenges of meeting consumer demands. As incomes increase, fulfilling nutritional requirements is less worrisome, and people make purchases based on more extrinsic factors.

"Consumers expect to have choices in their meat selections," Stika said. "The challenge is to position these choices in a way that doesn't throw other parts of the industry under the bus."

Justin Ransom of OSI Industries, a supplier to McDonald's and several food service companies, said, "Sustainability is not a fad." Indeed, it is shaping the way McDonald's works with all of its suppliers, he added.

The event was concluded by Jose Simas, Elanco senior director, who tied together the needs of producers and retailers with the wants of consumers. To meet the world's food demands, the industry must be able to use technology to keep foods more affordable and available, he stressed.

Despite technological nay-sayers, Simas said meat industry leaders must continue to focus on feeding the world. "An elite few should not be able to dictate the food choices available to the masses," he said.

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