

Speaking Out

Several Hereford breeders from across the country are speaking out for the beef industry, taking a stand against the false negativity that surrounds cattle production.

by **Christy Couch Lee**

It's impossible to avoid it. Negative press surrounding the beef industry on the national news and in national publications seems to arise weekly. Animal activist groups, including the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), with a 2008 budget of more than \$131 million, make it well known that a world without livestock production is their ultimate goal.

So, what is a cattleman to do? It's simple. Take a stand for the industry.

Several Hereford breeders across the country — including Kyle McMillan, Sam Shaw and Susan Gebhart — are doing their part, speaking out to portray the industry in a positive light and tout the positives of beef production.

Although the task may seem daunting, these producers say that

with a little training and the right motivation, every cattleman can take a stand. And, in this uncertain world, that's exactly what it's going to take to thrive and survive against such strong opposition.

Getting their start

McMillan, Shaw and Gebhart may not have realized it when they were young, but their lives have prepared them to be advocates for the industry.

McMillan was raised on a small Hereford operation in Highland, Ill., where he was active in 4-H and FFA. He became involved in the state and national Hereford organizations, serving as the National Junior Polled Hereford Council president in 1994.

His parents, Ed and Judy McMillan, Greenville, Ill., have been instrumental in his Hereford involvement, and Ed currently serves on the *Certified Hereford Beef* (CHB®) board of directors.

McMillan received a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics from the University of Illinois and then earned his master's degree from Colorado State University, specializing in beef industry leadership.

He has received media training for the past 15 years, first through his junior board experience. Most recently, he participated in the two-year Illinois Agricultural Leadership Foundation, through which participants attend 16 seminars, meet with politicians in

Washington, D.C., and travel abroad to learn about agriculture around the world.

Although McMillan works off the farm as a national sales manager for BASF plant science, he still remains active in the Hereford industry. Today, he and his family — wife, Jodi, and daughter, Lauren — run a small Hereford operation in Ohio, Ill., focusing on donor cows and cooperator herds to raise embryo calves, with a primary focus on junior show cattle.

Sam Shaw, Caldwell, Idaho, has grown up in the Hereford industry, raising registered Hereford, Angus and Red Angus on the ranch established by his grandfather, Tom Shaw. Sam served on the American Junior Hereford Association board of directors for three years and was selected by the American Hereford Association to attend the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Young Cattlemen's Conference.

He attended the University of Idaho, where he received his bachelor's degree in agricultural business in 1999, and then returned to the family ranch. He ranches alongside his parents, Greg and Cleo; brother and sister-in-law, Tucker and Angie; and wife, Janel.

Today, Shaw Cattle Co. consists of 900 mother cows, which calve in the spring and fall. In mid-February, the Shaws host an annual production sale, selling about 250 bulls, 60 crossbred heifers and 40 purebred heifers



Kyle McMillan, Ohio, Ill., says Hereford producers must speak out for their industry. "If we don't speak up, it's very possible that all of livestock or meat animal production could be moved abroad."



Sam Shaw, Caldwell, Idaho, says he and his family have an open-door policy with the media. "We never turn away a news group. We are always open to them."

out of the top end of their replacement females.

Currently, Shaw is active in local and state cattlemen's associations, serving as the purebred council chair for the Idaho Cattlemen's Association.

Susan Gebhart and her husband, Richard, raise Herefords with their family on the land settled in 1910 by her grandparents in Claremore, Okla.

Their current cattle operation began when their children became active in FFA. Every family member, including daughter Roxane and daughter Erica and her husband, Matt Boyer, works off the ranch. However, the ranch is a family affair.

Each Gebhart family member has a role in the operation, and all of them enjoy traveling as a family to exhibit their cattle at the top livestock shows in the country.

Although these three individuals' backgrounds are diverse, their mission is the same: to help preserve and protect the cattle industry by letting their voices be heard.

Why it's important

McMillan believes it is critical for cattlemen to speak out for their industry.

"Activist groups have extremely deep pockets, and they have an unparalleled passion about their viewpoints," McMillan says. "If we,



Susan Gebhart, Claremore, Okla., says the NCBA Master of Beef Advocacy (MBA) Program helped prepare her for questions the public may ask. "They do a good job of teaching you how to encapsulate answers to little pearls of information that you need to get across."

as producers, don't engage in that dialog with the public, our message will not be heard. If we don't speak up, it's very possible that all of livestock or meat animal production could be moved abroad."

Shaw says, as the general public becomes more removed from the farm, producers must stand as the voice of agriculture.

"It used to be that a large percentage of the general public were rural, or from an agricultural background," Shaw says. "We have

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Cattlemen get social with social media

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) is utilizing Master of Beef Advocacy (MBA) graduates — and beef producers, in general — to make a presence in social media, including Twitter and Facebook.

Last fall, the NCBA conducted a "Food Fight" campaign in response to the *Time* article regarding food production in America in which beef was cited as a cause of global warming, obesity and heart disease, says Daren Williams, NCBA executive director of communications.

"Producers were saying, 'What is going on? This doesn't resemble anything we know to be true about this industry,'" Williams says. "We are really in a fight for modern beef production. We've got to engage in this."



In November NCBA launched a "Give Thanks" program, through which producers were encouraged to "give thanks" for beef and beef producers. Activities included sending "Give Thanks" letters to the editor, handing out business cards, using e-mail signatures, social media posts, viral "Give Thanks" e-mails, and encouraging producers and consumers to volunteer at a food bank.

Most recently, NCBA conducted the "I Heart Beef" campaign in February. Beef producers and industry supporters showed their love of beef by changing their profile photos to the "I Heart Beef" logo, writing "love letters" to beef on the "Beef. It's what's for dinner" Facebook page and entering discussions about why beef is the perfect complement to a romantic dinner.



In addition, Williams says, beef producers have become stronger advocates in online media. One such example was a stream of comments in support of the beef industry in regards to a *Washington Post* article negatively portraying beef production on the environment. And, when [yellow tail] wine announced a \$100,000 donation to the Humane Society of the United States in February, livestock producers filled the [yellow tail] Facebook page with notes of their concern and removal of support for the company.

To learn more about how the NCBA is working to create a positive image for the beef industry or to participate in the MBA program, contact Williams at mba@beef.org. **HW**



Producers need to be prepared to speak out for the industry so consumers like these continue to buy beef at the market place.

to tell our story. If we don't, the media will. And, sometimes, the media will get something and run with it, and it might not all be true."

Shaw has witnessed first-hand the devastation of misinformation in the public.

"In the West we have a lot of Bureau of Land Management — government-owned — ground," Shaw says. "Groups are trying to kick ranchers off the ground, saying how bad they are for it.

The ranchers are out there being stewards of the land. That's how they make their living. If they abuse the land, it won't be there.

"But, those groups have a lot of money, and they know a lot of lawyers and judges," Shaw continues. "They can take someone to court, and whether you're right or wrong, you have to hire a lawyer to defend yourself. It can be costly."

Ultimately, with the proper training, producers may be able to be a proactive voice against opposition. But, where is a person to begin?

Learning the ropes

McMillan recommends seeking a mentor actively engaged in the community, in order to gain insight into how to serve as an ambassador for the industry.

In addition, he says, preparing a "30-second elevator speech" is key.

"I liken it to Hereford producers," McMillan says. "If someone asks about your Hereford operation, you should be able to tell that person all about your operation in 30 seconds. You also need to have that same 30-second sound bite about issues in the industry. You must be educated and aware. And, you should be able to shore it up with current facts and statistics about what's going on in the industry today."

McMillan says it's also critical that cattlemen are aware of all

aspects of the agricultural industry — not only the cattle industry.

"It's important to stay up to speed with what's going on out there — not only with our industry but with those who touch agriculture," McMillan says. "For example, if the beef industry does not pay attention to the swine or dairy industries, one regulation could get passed that could ultimately affect beef production."

In addition to staying aware of current issues, Shaw and his family have also implemented an open-door policy with the media.

"We never turn away a news group," Shaw says. "We are always open to them. They're always so amazed when they get out here. The cows look good, and we have nice green grass and fresh water."

Not only does this relationship work well in good times, sometimes it works well in challenging times for the industry, as well.

"When they get a bad story, they're going to call you if they know you," Shaw says. "And, you can sometimes head them off. Very few people in this industry have something to hide. For the most part, everyone is proud of their place and their cattle and what they're producing. Let people see it."

McMillan recommends producers become actively involved with their state beef associations in addition to the NCBA. Not only does this involvement keep producers up to date on current events, it also provides formal training for advocacy.

One such program, which Gebhart recently completed, is the Beef Checkoff-funded NCBA Master of Beef Advocacy (MBA) program.

Daren Williams, NCBA executive director of communications, says since the program's inception last March, 1,700 cattlemen have enrolled in the program, and about 670 have completed the online courses and "graduated."

"The goal of our program is to equip beef producers and allies to be everyday advocates for the beef industry," Williams says. "Our goal



Cattle producer Mark Smith (left), LOCATION, participates in media training with Daren Williams, NCBA executive director of communications, during a recent NCBA Master of Beef Advocacy (MBA) program training.

is for producers to be well versed in all issues impacting the industry, so they can serve as our ground troops in this battle going on about how food is produced.”

In the program producers complete six one-hour online training sessions, and complete a final “beef checkoff,” in which participants give a presentation about the benefits of beef in their local communities. An optional commencement concludes the MBA experience.

Gebhart says the program taught her how to answer consumers’ questions about the beef industry.

“They do a good job of teaching you how to encapsulate answers to little pearls of information that you need to get across,” Gebhart says. “They teach you to answer questions their market research team knows people have. And, it teaches you to sometimes weave things in without a person even asking the question.”

And, often, producers can be most effective through subtle approaches.

Telling the story

Gebhart says, with every family member working off the ranch, members of her family are presented with many unique opportunities to educate the public. Susan and Erica work in a business specializing in training members of the medical field; Richard is a professor at the University of Tulsa; and Matt is an agriculture teacher in Claremore.

“The thing about having town jobs and ranching on the side, it gives you this unique opportunity to drop tidbits here, there and yon’,” Susan says. “You never know the people you’ll cross paths with and the impact you’ll have.”

In addition, the Gebhart family has established a Web site and blog for their ranch and dog sales: www.threechicksontheranch.com. Through this site, the Gebharts share humorous stories of life on the ranch, with an underlying goal of educating the general public in the process.

“I find that people that go to look at my puppies will start



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— Daren Williams

reading our cattle blog,” Gebhart says. “I tell funny stories, and people think it’s fun to read. I’ve really learned from my dog blog — I tell a lot of stories. We try to tell the stories before people have an objection to what we do.”

Williams says there’s no “formula” for how producers should speak out for the industry. In fact, he says, some of the most successful advocates simply do what fits them best.

One producer set up a table at his homeowners’ association event, with a sign saying, “Ask me about beef.” Another retired beef producer has begun giving presentations at senior centers about the importance of protein later in life, Williams says.

“Beef producers, and cattlemen, in general, are encouraged to find their niche,” Williams says. “What can they do on a daily, weekly or monthly basis to engage in this discussion?”

In order to engage in the discussion and cast a positive light on the industry, McMillan recommends producers develop guidelines and standard operating procedures for their ranch or farm.

“The beef industry has an opportunity to grow in all segments of the industry,” McMillan says. “We should be reinforcing positive actions and implementing programs at a local level. Producers should become active on a local level or seek out other like-minded individuals to combine resources and become more efficient.”

Today, McMillan and his wife, Jodi, serve as the Illinois Polled Hereford Association secretary in addition to working with the Illinois Beef Association and surrounding state beef associations to promote state Hereford events.

Shaw works to put a face to agriculture, visiting with state senators as part of his Idaho Cattlemen’s Association board responsibilities.

“Even in Idaho, which is a rural state, many senators come from Boise and have no connection with agriculture,” Shaw says.

A producer’s chosen method of advocacy is not nearly as important as the simple act of getting out and taking a stand.

Don’t be shy

If producers choose not to speak out, McMillan believes the result will be simple.

“If producers don’t speak out, it’s almost simple and straightforward,” McMillan says. “The industry may not exist in the near future. Activist groups are so well armed from a financial and passion standpoint, they could regulate all of agriculture out of the United States.”

Shaw says he understands how intimidating speaking out can seem.

“That’s a tough deal,” he says. “But, I’ll say this: this is our industry. If we don’t speak for ourselves, someone else will. If it’s truly something you love and enjoy, you’re not looking for another job. I want to have a ranch here, and I want my kids to be able to come back here, if they choose.”

Despite the misinformation circulating about the beef industry today, cattlemen take pride in producing a safe, wholesome and healthy product for consumers.

It’s time for the public to see this truth for themselves. Cattlemen, it’s time to take a stand for your industry. **HW**