

2007 Beef Improvement Federation 39th Annual Meeting

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Critical Junctures

Speakers consider relevance of genetics research, education, Extension.

by Eric Grant

FORT COLLINS, COLO. (June 7, 2007) — Are beef genetics research, education and Extension relevant? Two speakers — one scientist, one producer — presented their responses to attendees of the 2007 Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) annual meeting in Fort Collins, Colo., June 7.

Advances in molecular biology mean the beef industry should aggressively embrace the emerging technology — and find ways to fund its research — to remain economically viable in the future. That was the message of Ronnie Green, national program leader of food animal production for USDA's Agriculture Research Service (ARS). Green said genome-enabled selection could help producers improve a number of important traits in the near future. Ultimately, this will enable them to make precise breeding decisions to improve bovine disease and stress resistance, adaptability and functionality.

"But if we don't invest in that infrastructure, we'll pay a significant price," Green said. "One of the questions we need to be asking is where are the scientists and educators going to come from who have a knowledge of the industry and its problems to address them. You can create a lot of molecular biologists, but not many of them know one end of a cow from the other."

Green said the beef industry is at a critical juncture, facing a multitude of challenges — everything from food safety to international trade to consolidation.

Consumers, too, are demanding a reduced "environmental footprint from livestock production," and increasing their demand for nontraditional beef products, he said.

"We are seeing profound societal and industry shifts," he said. "There is a push to

narrow the gene pool, but concerns about the loss of heterosis. There is a need for information to accelerate, and a strong desire to move from a breed world to a gene pool world.

"We need to be studying these trends and understand what's happening in other industries, particularly within the dairy industry," Green continued. "Could our industry eventually be shipped offshore? There are some who believe animal ag doesn't belong in the United States anymore, and they would just as soon choose that we no longer exist."

Producer perspective

To remain economically viable in the future, the industry should build interdependent relationships among themselves and government to find viable methods of remaining sustainable in the future, seedstock producer Brian McCulloh added.

"It's time that we do a better job of re-engaging in and working on interdependent relationships," the manager of Woodhill Farms, Viroqua, Wis., said. "You can still maintain your independence, but let's come back to the table so we can be reassured that our kids will continue.

"U.S. agriculture is the envy of the world because we have independent business producers who care about their livelihood," he added. "But it requires cooperation, and it takes working together."



► Producers need to revisit the concept of producer networks to remain competitive, seedstock producer Brian McCulloh told attendees.



► The industry needs a renaissance in beef cattle genetics research, Ronnie Green, USDA-ARS, said, questioning where future scientists and educators would be found.

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Look for the PowerPoints and audio files for these presentations in the newsroom. A proceedings paper for Ronnie Green's presentation is available on the "Symposium Papers" page.



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