

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

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American Farm Bureau Federation

Farmer Engagement Must Move Beyond Feeding the World

By Mace Thornton

Producing a bounty of U.S.-grown food to sell and share beyond our borders remains a matter of deep pride to America's farmers and ranchers. A growing body of evidence suggests, however, that Americans who do not farm or ranch really don't give a rip that America's farmers and ranchers are striving to feed the world.

In this age of engagement-based communication, it is vital that each precious minute farmers and ranchers have to connect with other American eaters is appealing and meaningful. Frankly, farmers talking about American agriculture's ability to feed the world no longer fits that category.

The first challenge to the wisdom of feed-the-world talk came last year from the Center for Food Integrity. Influential consumers were asked to rank 17 specific issues related to our nation and food. The item ranking last in importance, by far, was the United States having enough food to feed people in developing countries.

While that result cracks open a door of skepticism, it does not stand alone. Work by the Illinois Farm Families coalition found that of a list of 10 compelling facts about farmers, facts related to productivity and feeding the world ranked near the bottom in terms of making people feel more positive about farmers.

There is additional evidence that chatter about feeding the world is simply not what consumers want to hear. To make matters worse, hard-core food activists like to hold up the feed-the-world message to ridicule today's agriculture as disconnected.

The time has come for farmers and ranchers to reframe their conversations with consumers. Keep it real. There must be a focus on issues vital to consumers, such as their desire to choose nutritious, safe food produced in a responsible manner.

There is no doubt; we are facing an urgent new reality related to how farmers engage with eaters. What makes it so hard to swallow is the knowledge that many farmers and ranchers consider it their professional, moral obligation to produce food for all people who need it. In fact, it borders on a divine mission.

Because farmers and ranchers grow up, raise their families and live where they work, each and every day, perhaps no other profession holds the same kind of enduring and unbreakable bond between professional duty and personal identity as does farming. In that environment, discovering that a belief you treasure rings hollow to those you are dedicated to serving, cuts like a two-edged sword. But the bottom line is, when it comes to communicating with consumers, personal feelings cannot be allowed to stand in the way of having an impact.

Another reason it is so hard to accept the urgent need to change the conversation is that the U.S. really is helping feed the world. We exported a heck of a lot more food and fiber than we imported in 2010, resulting in a positive agricultural trade balance of nearly \$34 billion.

While that fact is worthy of pride, beyond the farm gate it is likely to resonate with less appeal than an empty lunchbox. Consumers hunger for real, compelling dialogue with farmers about how they are working conscientiously to produce high-quality food. Give them what they crave.