

Farmers, It's Time to Take Back 'Sustainable'

By Troy Hadrick

It's hard to get through the day anymore without hearing the word "sustainable." In fact, I was recently asked if I was a factory farmer or if I raised cattle sustainably. Who judges what's sustainable and what isn't? It seems that the word has been hijacked and is being used by people who are opposed to modern agriculture.

Sometimes you just have to shake your head when you hear the term. When I hear about sustainable wood, it always puzzles me. Are there some trees that don't grow back?

But in food production, we hear more and more that modern agriculture can't continue down the same path it's currently on. What exactly led to that false notion, and how would anyone possess the kind of knowledge needed to back up that sweeping statement?

Skeptics say we should go back to how we used to raise crops and livestock. But how far back should we go? To the 1950s? Or how about the 1870s? Maybe we could go back to when everyone raised just their own food?

Broadly, it is frequently true that so-called sustainable practices are those techniques used before the combustion engine was invented. Every industry has adapted and used technology to improve production methods and output. That includes agriculture.

From a farmer's perspective, there are two questions that should have to be answered before any agricultural practice can truly be considered sustainable. First, will the farm and ranch families implementing the practice be able to generate enough income to continue farming or ranching? Will those families be sustainable? And second, will the practice help producers increase food production to keep up with a growing population? If the answer to either of these questions is no, then, from my perspective, it should not be considered sustainable.

If farmers and ranchers can't make a living, they obviously won't be around very long. That's not what I would call a sustainable practice. Or if America's farmers and ranchers are forced to use production methods that do not yield enough food for everyone would you consider that sustainable? I wouldn't.

At the end of the day, agriculture has a single, yet vital, responsibility — to provide food, fiber, fuel and other basics of life for an ever-growing world. The agriculture industry that some folks like to envision is better described as nostalgic rather than sustainable or even realistic. Our society wouldn't have developed into what it is today if 25 percent or more of our workforce was still required to grow food. For the past century, we have continually produced more food with less farm inputs. With the technologies available today, that trend will continue.

American agriculture has a longer track record than any other industry in this country. Many families are producing food on the same land their ancestors did. That is proof of sustainability. Farmers and ranchers know a thing or two about being sustainable since our livelihood depends on it. It's time we take our word "sustainable" back and encourage everyone to think about and use its real definition.