Cattle Chat: Raising beef sustainably

K-State cattle experts explain how cattle producers can best manage their resources

By Lisa Moser, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. — When making a recipe, the quality of the ingredients and how they are managed in the cooking process can have an impact on the palatability of the final dish.

In much the same way, how beef cattle are raised and how the resources are managed can have a big impact on a beef producer’s economic viability, said the experts at the Kansas State University Beef Cattle Institute.

Speaking on a recent Cattle Chat podcast, the team joined with Kansas Beef Council dietician and director of nutrition Abby Heidari to visit about how different audiences define sustainability.

“For the beef producer, sustainability is tied to resource use and efficiency,” said Phillip Lancaster, beef cattle nutritionist. “The more efficiently cattle producers use their resources, the more they can reduce the input costs per unit of production.”

Agricultural economist Dustin Pendell added: “Producers need to be able to make a profit to be economically sustainable.”

Pendell said ways that cattle producers can help meet that goal of economic sustainability include land use management and reproductive efficiencies, among others.

Heidari said the consumer may view sustainability differently, as some people are interested in eating plant-based foods and reducing food waste.

“From a consumer perspective, we try to show how cattle can provide protein and micronutrients that are more digestible to humans than a plant-based alternative,” Heidari said.

She said that many consumers she engages with are concerned about greenhouse gas emissions.
“The single most impactful thing we can do as consumers to reduce our individual greenhouse gas emissions is to find ways to minimize food waste,” Heidari said.

She said beef cattle are able to help with that goal because they can eat by-products that people cannot, which reduces food waste. This concept is called upcycling.

“Upcycling is when cattle consume nutrients from plants with poor ability to meet human needs and convert those nutrients into beef which is a high-quality protein source,” Lancaster said.

He explained that because cattle are ruminants (meaning they have four compartments to their stomach), they are able to consume forages and other food waste by-products from food processing businesses and convert them to a high-quality protein that people can eat.

“Some of this food waste would otherwise go to the landfill and that creates methane,” Heidari said.

To hear the full discussion, listen to the Cattle Chat podcast online or through your preferred streaming platform.

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