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In recent months AgSight has addressed the vegan / vegetarian agenda with focus on some of the broad misrepresentations of animal agriculture often portrayed by those who choose to avoid meat, milk and/or eggs. Unfortunately, perceived benefits of such a lifestyle are often anecdotal and subjective – the outcome being mischaracterization of the industry and its products. Such misperceptions have become increasingly pervasive. Fact needs to win out over fiction – especially among the popular media.

That reality has prompted the National Institute for Animal Agriculture (NIAA) to implement an industry council with broad representation across a variety of interests within animal agriculture. NIAA has a long, proven history serving animal agriculture in tackling important concerns within the industry. Not surprising given NIAA’s mission: “... to provide a forum for building consensus and advancing solutions for animal agriculture and to provide continuing education and communication linkages to animal agriculture professionals.” The time has arrived to once again step forward.

The council’s purpose is to develop and deliver fact- and knowledge-based information that impacts public understanding on any issue of importance. Ultimately, such an effort will help to ensure the viability of animal agriculture and food production in a safe, wholesome and plentiful manner into the future. As part of that process, I was asked to provide some commentary on the need for such a council – written on behalf of NIAA for *Animal Agriculture* leading up to this month’s annual meeting in Kansas City. You’ll find that below.

(For more information about NIAA go to www.animalagriculture.org)

Animal agriculture stands alone: it’s difficult to identify any other industry that’s forced to constantly navigate the dynamic merger of business principles coupled with personal and/or social values. That’s a tough job...and getting tougher every day. On one hand, business competition and concerns about profitability play their hand at levels of production; the enduring need to become increasingly efficient and productive never ends. On the other hand, the pressure to operate within a framework of social acceptability is unprecedented; the media and general public has found renewed interest in values associated with animal agriculture.

Consumer interest, involvement and partnership is welcome. After all, nothing’s more important than the food we produce for their families to consume. Therefore, standards and ideals are essential at all stages of production. However, that interest has been progressively twisted and leveraged by extremists in recent years. No doubt, criticism is sometimes justified and the industry can neither tolerate nor defend offenders of common-sense ethics. However, the condemnation is often unsubstantiated, bent to demean and devalue mainstream agriculture, as part of a larger idealistic campaign.

Those with an anti-meat/milk agenda mischaracterize animal agriculture and/or its products: ‘There are so many reasons to go vegan - ethics, environment, health, world hunger (or any other issue you might want to list)...and no reason to allow the industry to continue.’ That mentality is especially convenient amidst vast abundance in the United States and refuses to cite any beneficial contribution of animal agriculture to society. That was best exemplified in August, 2009: *Time Magazine*’s story entitled, “The Real Cost of Cheap Food” was highlighted by a hamburger on the front cover. The overarching message? Animal agriculture is the culprit of the world’s problems associated with food and food production.

Animal agriculture has a responsibility to produce safe, wholesome, nutritious food in an ethical manner. And most of the time we get it right. As such, many of the assertions against the industry are unfounded, untrue and just plain wrong. But animal agriculture is inherently a fragmented business where independence is a highly-esteemed virtue. That attribute is

problematic – it provides an opening for those who want to caricature the industry in an unfavorable light – intentional or not. Divide and conquer: we're unable to mount a meaningful counterattack and that emboldens those on the other side even further.

The response to negative events typically involves a brush-fire mentality. We crank up the crisis management team and try to beat back the blaze hoping it doesn't do too much damage in the meantime. Once the fire seems to be put out we go back to doing business-as-usual. But the reactive ad-hoc approach is clumsy and ineffective. More importantly, it's a blueprint for failure - we aren't keeping up with opponents' increasingly frequent assaults.

That possesses some important consequences: namely, misinformation, half-truths and anti-agriculture doctrines begin to catch hold. And when they do, families are the ultimate losers – it destabilizes and demoralizes consumers – there's no solid, reliable source of information about their food and food production.

Animal agriculture needs to be out ahead of the curve! The need for a unified, meaningful and systematic coalition to counter false claims while also promoting the benefits and attributes of animal production has never been more important. Consumers are eager to know the other side – objective and factual information. We can't afford to hunker down. Meeting our obligation on the production side and hoping that's good enough isn't working. We also have to advocate the attributes of animal agriculture and its products in a collective, coherent manner.

Let's get started.