

# *Consumerism Meets Agri-Business* \*

FRANK LESSITER

THE WAVE OF CONSUMERISM sweeping the country today appears pretty frightening to many of our farmers and ranchers. Frankly, they're scared of consumerism. They're not so concerned about what it represents, but more about the effect it might have on American agriculture if it gets out of hand.

Our farmers and ranchers are used to battling the weather, diseases, changing market prices, government regulations, and many other items. But they are not used to continually considering the changing and sometimes unpredictable demands of the consumer.

Basically, the farmer is going to have to learn to deal with a consuming public who doesn't care much about the existence of farmers and ranchers. They also tend to often overlook the farmer's contribution to their daily way of life. There's a lack of communication here.

One state pork producers group thought they were really getting through to consumers when they started getting large orders from Chicago residents for their "Pigs are Pretty" button. Only later did they find out why. They were being ordered by Hippies who were wearing them in demonstrations against city policemen.

Politics enters in too. For example, New York City Mayor John Lindsay earlier this year made an unfortunate attack on the beef industry. It was filled with many untruths. His opinions were typical of many of the criticisms agriculture is getting today. Lindsay had all of the answers, but unfortunately he wasn't

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aware of the real problems. It is this kind of uncalled for comment that stirs consumers up about agriculture.

Today, farmers have to be concerned about much more than just what the consumer thinks about food and fiber. We've got to be concerned about his or her opinion on foreign policy, air and water pollution, about pesticides, our domestic economic situation, imports, the use of public lands, odors, and the quality of our food inspection services.

Faced with these problems, the farmer is going to have to change his tune.

This consumer-oriented action in the production of food and fiber is not really new. We have continually improved our products in response to consumer demands. For example, we are not producing anywhere the amount of fat on our beef cattle or hogs today that we did just a few years ago. Consumer buying habits forced us to change. Yet there's still plenty of room for improvement in most areas. For instance, only about half of our hogs today really qualify as lean, meat-type hogs.

The first thing we need to do is convince ourselves that both consumerism and environmentalism are definitely here to stay. People have turned to these causes because they are frustrated over what is happening in Viet Nam, the inner city situation, drugs, and other problems. They can't do much about these problems. But then along comes consumerism and environmentalism, which both offer citizens good opportunities to get involved.

### *Need for Regulations Accepted*

No one quarrels with the need for more regulations to protect human health and safety. If the consumer wants more protective laws, that's fine. But she had better be prepared to pay for them. One way or another, the consumer is going to have to dig down into her pocketbook for the extra cost of consumer protection.

Farmers aren't being adequately paid today for what they produce, so they can't be expected to pay for this added consumer protection. If beef prices had increased as much since 1960 as labor costs, cattlemen would be getting \$99 more per head today.

It's not that the farmers aren't aware of the problems and concerns of consumers. Besides being farmers, they qualify as consumers themselves. They are more aware of—and more concerned over—the danger of pesticides than the consumers. At

the same time, they are more aware of the consumer's benefits from agricultural chemicals.

Farmers are prepared to give up some of their favorite agricultural chemicals in the future. They've already seen DDT and some seed treatment products removed from the market. They expect to see more products removed in the future, too. But they don't want to see any complete curtailment of agricultural chemicals and the consumer won't either once she knows all the facts.

Once we've told the consumer it will cost 40¢ to 50¢ more for every \$1 worth of groceries she buys, it will begin to hit home to her too. Crop yields would drop 20 to 30 per cent without pesticides. This would force food prices up by 50 to 70 per cent. Then the consumer would have to budget over one-third of her income for food—and she doesn't want that.

We haven't done everything possible to overcome the consumer's fears of certain food products either. For example, the National Pork Producer Council's six-month study of consumer pork buying habits in six cities showed that 80 per cent of the women still believe pork isn't safe to eat. We need to do something about this kind of image for American agriculture. It's time garbage feeding of hogs was completely outlawed too.

### *Government Payments Need Explaining*

Farm payments are another touchy topic with consumers. When the general public hears about a few farms getting over \$1 million in government farm payments, they wonder about the entire program. I don't blame them. My secretary doesn't understand why Mississippi's Senator Eastland gets nearly \$150,000 yearly in government farm payments for his own cotton farm. She can see why he continues to vote against payment limitations. It's not easy to defend this program when this kind of dough is being tossed around to some of the bigger outfits. The number getting over \$25,000 yearly is up 60 per cent since 1966, too.

Something else that we need to get used to is Ralph Nader and his crusaders. They are going to be with us for some time, and he's not going to by-pass the food industry, either.

It has been difficult to go to a livestock meeting during the past six months and not hear some discussion of Ralph Nader mentioned by producers talking in the halls. Most farm organi-

zations, USDA, and the Food and Drug Administration are scared of him. The Food and Drug Administration has recently had their turn and USDA can hardly wait to hear what Nader has to say about them.

I'm going to stick my neck out and say Ralph Nader can bring about some good changes for agriculture. He's basically interested in consumer protection and any good that is done along these lines will help agriculture's image with consumers. He is surely going to bring about some changes in the way we produce food—and eventually it is going to be for the good.

Something the consumers will like to hear, is that our new breed of young farmers—and farm magazine editors—would like to see the government get out of agriculture. These young men want to run their own show. They are convinced they could do a better job than the government has done in the past.

Some of the changes being made in the way food is retailed will influence agriculture too. Packers are concentrating more on boning and pre-cutting beef to customer specifications. They need a heavier animal for this type of packing operation. Within a few years we may see meat sold in individually cut portions at the supermarket. Packers are already doing this for the institutional trade.

As more meat is pre-packaged by packers, butchers will disappear from behind supermarket meat counters. As far as I am concerned, this is going to be a good deal for everyone in our own Chicago area. Our meat cutters have got such a lock on the chain stores now that we can't even buy meat on Sundays or after 6:00 o'clock at night. The only reason these union meat cutters demand that stores operate under such weird rules is that they're scared they are going to lose their jobs. And they are right.

### *Misunderstanding on Both Sides*

But the problem isn't all one sided. Agriculture hasn't always been able to understand the consumer either. For instance, I am married to a city girl. And she can do just as much complaining about rising food prices as anyone else. She has spent some time on farms, knows a lot of farm people, understands part of the agricultural problem, yet still doesn't like to pay more for food. Let me tell you something that really irritates her after she's just

lugged four bags of groceries in from the car and put a dent in the checkbook. When I remind her that food is really a bargain, she isn't convinced.

I think that it is time we took the food is a bargain statement and junked it forever. I am convinced it does us more harm today than good.

At most beef and hog meetings I've gone to lately, the big subject in addition to consumerism has been feedlot pollution. Farmers are really concerned about this. They know they are going to get a lot of heat on this from all branches of the government and from neighbors. And they know it is going to cost plenty of money to solve pollution problems. I've heard a feeder say it will cost him \$5 to \$10 per head to eliminate feedlot pollution. And he was running a 20,000-head capacity feedlot. That size feedlot produces as much waste as a city of 250,000 people.

President Nixon told Congress earlier this year that agricultural pollution is the most troublesome of all sources of pollution. He cited animal waste, pesticides, fertilizers, and drugs as major problems.

Washington is now mapping a major war against pollution and much of this will be concerned with agriculture. How fast and how far Washington will move on pollution remains to be seen. It depends on how much money they can find to use for this.

But, in conclusion, agriculture's big problem is that it has a poor image with the general public. Farmers and ranchers have made tremendous contributions toward our American way of life, but most of this has gone unrecognized. It's going to get worse in the future unless we do something about it.

Agriculture has got to learn to speak with a united voice to consumers. This isn't easy because agriculture itself is so diversified. But other industries have shown how it can be done. And we need to do it too.