

On Organic, Sustainable and Conventional Agriculture...Why do Farmers and Ranchers Eat Their Young?

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One of nature's most disturbing phenomenon is when, in times of stress, a new mother may actually eat her young. It seems so unnatural and contrary to our value system that it is hard to fathom. So why do farmers and ranchers practice cannibalism?

There are a very small percentage of people in our country who have assumed the mission of feeding the population of the United States as well as exporting to much of the world. No small task and one that we should be proud of, but a mission that is fraught with constant challenges in an evolving global economy. So why are we so divisive within our shrinking ranks and seemingly hell-bent on criticizing each other? Each segment of agriculture (organic, sustainable, conventional) seems intent on making the other type look bad. It is a sad commentary on humanity that the way we defend ourselves is by tearing others down.

I know you have heard it or said it yourself. If you are organic, natural, niche---“our product is healthier and safer—not laced with pesticides/herbicides/antibiotics/ etc. that are destroying our environment.” If you are conventional --“those greenies have no clue about how to feed the world. What are they trying to do, take us back to forty acres and a mule?” **Note**---I would draw the distinction between effective marketing ---“My product is wonderful, healthy and tastes great” and negative marketing “The other guy's stuff is bad”. I know it is a fine line, but one that we should be very careful not to cross.

Politically, agriculture has a small voice and has to speak loudly to be heard. Based on recent experiences, however, our different voices on many issues portray an industry that is at best segmented and at worst conflicted. Witness the California proposition 2 debacle. Not only was agriculture confronted by a well organized and funded opposition, but we took turns opposing each other as well. I see this all too often. I am not suggesting that everyone should agree on all issues, but for one segment of our industry to attack another for political or economic gain is a disturbing practice.

Aren't we all in the same business? Of what value is it to try and establish doubt in the consumer's mind about our products or about our commitment to a safe and wholesome food supply? “Those organic guys must be cheating or they wouldn't get that yield.” “Those conventional guys don't care about destroying soil and polluting the water.” We have entire websites sponsored by people who seem to make a living mocking each other. What a waste of energy.

And some of you would say “Look at the statistics! Look at this study that proves MY point.” The selective use of statistics is both annoying and intellectually dishonest. It doesn't pass the test of critical thinking and problem solving that we hope students can achieve. We can all find “reputable” studies that demonstrate what we wish to prove and that is why the public does not trust science!

We have developed and are continuing to expand a wide array of tools--from no-till to biological controls to natural pesticides to biotechnology and the latest class of safe herbicides and pesticides. In order for one of those tools to be good, does the other have to be bad? Can't we utilize one system without disparaging someone else's choice?

Before we pass judgment on a rancher's or farmer's methods, or he/she chooses a production system, we need more information. What are the economic constraints (capital, labor, equipment, debt load, etc.)? What is the scope of the operation? Where is it located? What is the soil type? What are the common problems? What is the target market? The list of questions goes on. Once you have honest answers to the questions, you begin to select the appropriate "tools" from the toolbox. "Should I use a genetically modified crop?" "Is there a market for my natural, grass-fed beef?" "What herbicides/pesticides are required?" There isn't always a right or a wrong answer. There is a series of choices that we all make to select a practice, critically evaluate and revisit as often as necessary.

As a cattle producer, I see this dilemma constantly. I have heard many of our more traditional producers mock any form of beef production (grass fed, natural, organic) that doesn't fit the norm. Similarly, I have watched some specialty beef producers criticize standard production systems, and some of them actually bragged at the increase of market share because of the diagnosis of BSE ("mad cow"). Don't we get it? Prices are tied together---if commodity beef decreases, specialty beef will do the same. The same is true in dairy or fruits and vegetables. All you have to do is see the challenges currently faced by conventional and organic dairy farmers to know that we are in one boat. "A high tide raises all ships", and presently, we are all faced with a pretty low tide.

As a professor, it seems to me that this constant sniping is also a disservice to our youth. It serves as nothing more than to confuse and discourage. We educate with the express intent of teaching them to be open-minded, life-long learners---not someone who has to choose a side. Clearly, academics have their own perspectives on the issue---that is normal. The true professional can teach production methods---demonstrating the range and opportunity for innovation without being hyper-critical of one particular type of technology. We want students to think critically; to be able to problem solve; and to understand the fallacy of selective statistics. We should be encouraging exploration, to take ideas from all places and to test them without prejudice.

And what about sustainability? I hope we have no agriculturalists advocating that we should be non-sustainable! We need future generations to have the same opportunity to be farmers and ranchers. The challenge is that many conventional farmers consider the term political and promoting an ideology that may be perceived as "anti-capitalistic" rather than real. Yet, if you ask those farmers, are they conserving water, trying to reduce inputs and care for the soil---the answer is an unequivocal "yes". We are making great strides incorporating sustainable practices and there is no reason to stop simply because we can't agree on the definition of sustainable.

Ultimately, we should be focused on our similarities rather than our differences. Farmers and ranchers care for the land and all natural resources. We have the highest expectations in the world for food safety and product quality. We take pride in what we do and hope to impart that legacy to future generations.

So what is the point? I sincerely hope that, as producers, we can look in the mirror and ask if we are more concerned with denigrating others or improving ourselves? If we can refrain from discounting a fellow agriculturalist simply because they chose a different path...if we can encourage our young people to broaden their perspectives. If we can do those things, the next generation will deal with these issues far better than we have. I remain optimistic. Agriculture's greatest attribute is resilience and adaptability. Let's keep trying for the sake of every person who puts food on the table.

Note: I have shared this in draft form with several industry leaders, academics and students. To a person, they said "absolutely correct", and then almost invariably shared with me an example of how the "other side" got it wrong. If they were conventional, they complained about the niche folks attacking them. If they were niche, it was the inverse. Thanks for proving my point. Now what are we going to do about it?