



# Sustainability... What is Wrong with Making a Profit?

By Ron Kuck, *Dairy and Livestock Educator*



I had the opportunity to listen to a talk on sustainability in agriculture at the 2017 New York Beef Producers Association (NYBPA) annual meeting last January 21, 2017. The surprise was the speaker was not a beef producer but Mr. Larry Kaagen, president of Kaagen Research Associates in New York City, a consulting and polling firm. Although better known for political, environmental, and consumer surveys, Mr. Kaagen said 30 to 40 percent of his clients are in agriculture.

When putting together polling or surveys for his agriculture clients he attempts to gather views from a “non-agricultural” perspective. The goal of the survey he presented to NYBPA members was to determine, “What do the views of people inside this room mean to people outside this room, people with little exposure to agriculture?” One point that he went back to over and over was “Consumers generally have no grasp on your point of view. And they are under no obligation to know!”

The conclusions he presented were from a survey he titled “**What does sustainable agriculture mean to the folks out there?**” To be sure, sustainability is now such an overused term we have lost its real meaning. Breaking out what sustainability means to the producer/farmer and the consumer fall into three concerns or categories: Environment; Social; Economic.

For a very long time farmers understood that how they take care of natural resources ensures the farm can be “sustainable” to be passed down to the next generation and “Save my farm.” To the consumer that might be very nice but all they want are agricultural practices that will “Save the planet.”

The current highlighting of how farm animals are cared for has taken “sustainability” into the realm of Social Responsibility. The farmer explains **WHY** I handle my animals a certain way, but **HOW** the farm animals are handled is most important to the consumer.

All businesses, whether they are farms or not, believe making a decent living and economic sustainability are the same word. Consumers complain, “Why is everything (food) so expensive?” For the farmer the grievance is always, “What is wrong with making a profit?”

He told the audience he is dismayed by a tendency of some industry (farm) groups to alienate, “demonize,” or drown out the voices of opponents. Farmers can get their message across if they’re willing to discuss issues with consumers without finding fault with their opinions. Opening your farm to tours and farmer’s markets are a good avenue to start these discussions. But he cautioned, “Tell them YOUR story is NOT about telling them ‘here’s what you should think about farming.’”

	PRODUCER/FARMER	CONSUMER
ENVIRONMENT	“Save my farm”	“Save the planet”
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILT Y	“Why I handle my cows”	“How do you handle your cows”
ECONOMIC	“Why can’t I make a profit?”	“Why is everything so expensive?”

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