

Words That Hurt Agriculture

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In my dual role as a “full-time” cattle rancher and “full-time” University administrator/ College professor, I have witnessed

how words that farmers/ranchers understand and often use cavalierly can create consternation and even fear among our customers.

After about 25 years of College teaching and venturing further outside of my comfort zone, I have witnessed the remarkable devolution of understanding of our food production system. We (Colleges of Agriculture) are partially to blame for this dramatic trend. We have worked so hard to demonstrate that we are scientifically trained, educated professionals, requiring tremendous technical and business savvy to survive – instead of hay seed farmers and ranchers—that we have given the impression that we no longer care for the land or animals. Somehow, people think we are all about science, technology and short term profit, rather than the conscientious land stewards and food producers that we know we are. Our new generation of farmers and ranchers has been taught to label themselves as animal scientists, agronomists, producers and agribusiness professionals. Yet consumers trust farmers and ranchers more than they trust those impressive titles.

Words hurt. And words create a very strong impression of food production to an unknowing and nervous public. Some of those words and phrases have been promoted by those who wish to change (and in some cases destroy) agriculture as we know it. Other words have crept into our agricultural lexicon and we use them without knowing the impact on those we are trying to feed. At the very least they create misunderstanding. At most, consumers begin to fear and distrust the food supply.

Is there a simple solution? No. But we should think carefully about the words we choose when we talk to a non agricultural public. Consider just a few examples...

Factory farming: perhaps the most damaging phrase to confront all of agriculture, but particularly

damning to animal production. No one likes to envision their food being “factory” produced. Factory conjures up images of smokestacks and discharge pipes. This phrase, more than any other, has created a negative perception with so many generally well educated, bright consumers because of the image it portrays. And you would be hard pressed to find any College or University that has not had multiple showings of *Fast Food Nation* and *Food Inc.*, lead by well meaning, but often misinformed college professors who gather information from the internet. The next generation is being blithely trained in the “horrors” of our current agricultural system.

Industry and industrial agriculture: how many of us frequently refer to the cattle “industry”, the pork “industry”, the wheat “industry” ... and the list goes on. Although more subtle, this has the same long term implications as factory farming. The term de-emphasizes the family nature of the business, the care for the land and resources and the value we place on renewable natural resources. Industry is associated with high and low tech manufacturing processes and is viewed as extractive and non-sustainable. Although manufacturing is an important component to growing and distributing food, “industrial” agriculture doesn’t play well with the increasingly urban public.

Corporate agriculture and agriculture-business: Most of us in production agriculture truly understand that incorporating a farm or ranch is a business decision, and that the overwhelming majority of agricultural operations that incorporate are family based. And, we also recognize that our sophisticated and efficient food production and distribution system does require large scaled agribusiness corporations. However, that does not diminish the fact that the term has been used to demonize parts of our food system. With the speculation and fraud on Wall Street, the bail-out of multi-national banks, “corporations” is not a word that creates a sense of integrity and safety with our consumers. Indiscriminate use of the term sows seeds of distrust.

Genetic engineering/ genetically modified organisms/ Biotechnology: What a remarkable technology that holds such incredible promise for innovations to increase the food supply and feed a

growing world population with finite resources. I know that and you know that. The average consumer does not. As a college professor over the better part of the past three decades, I have watched the growing distrust of science which truly saddens me. And, there is a perception that scientists can be bought by the highest bidder. For every study you find making a claim, you can quickly find a study with conflicting results. And to the layman, the credentials of the scientists are indistinguishable. People don't trust science, and we are often our own worst enemy. We speak in technical language and acronyms, simply believing the power of our facts are sufficient to win the argument. Sorry. "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care". That doesn't mean we shouldn't utilize biotechnology, but caution is the better part of valor. I have a colleague who is not from agriculture, but an incredibly bright, articulate and respected university administrator. After a meeting one day she confided her respect for agriculture, about what we do and how underappreciated we are. She added however, that she wasn't a science person and how genetic engineering frightens her as a consumer.

Feedlot: following Fast Food Nation, Food Inc. and Power Steer, the term has become synonymous with an evil factory where animals are abused and stand up to their knees in their own excrement. Ridiculous! The fact remains that this is the image that the term creates for too many people. On a recent tour of an extremely progressive, clean feedlot in the west, a senior animal science major from a non-agricultural background confessed that before my class, she thought all the cattle were born and raised in a feedlot for their entire life. She had "learned" that in her non-ag classes. The term is being used effectively and aggressively by those who would like to destroy our current model of beef production.

CAFO's : Confined Animal Feeding Operation. See feedlot. This term is lesser known to the average consumer but being used heavily by regulators and extremists. This term is now part of the federal lexicon. It won't go away, but needs to be carefully explained.

Chemical: Since when did this become a bad word? The miracles of what some chemicals have provided to mankind are too numerous to mention. After suffering through several semesters of chemistry, most of us in the sciences understand we are composed of chemicals. Somehow, the average

consumer has begun to equate chemical with poison and has no idea the positive impact chemicals can and have played in their daily lives.

Herbicide/ pesticide: once again, we have these broad terms that are considered "bad" by too many consumers. Yet these products are essential to growing an abundant, safe food supply. I am not suggesting we change the term, but where are the easy, quick and simple facts which demonstrate the importance of these products to the average consumer?

Conventional agriculture: What the hell is that? Is there anything conventional about what we do? I realize the term was coined to distinguish organic, sustainable, alternative agriculture from standard practices. It is a very bad misnomer. There is nothing conventional about successful farmers and ranchers. Conventional implies standard and non-changing. Are you kidding me? If you are still in business, you are constantly changing. The use of GPS, new irrigation methods, new varieties, and new vaccines... just to name a few. We are not conventional, but we are innovative and progressive!

On a recent visit to the San Francisco International Airport, I marveled at the diverse array of people—all sizes, shapes and ethnicities. The only thing consistent was all of them need to eat every day. And most of them know nothing about how food is grown other than what they have read or heard in the popular press. And we (farmers/ranchers) don't help matters much. Our job is to create trust, and that requires simple, clear and direct explanations of how we grow food. So the next time you break into your agricultural jargon with a non-ag person, ask them what they really think some of these terms mean. You may be in for a shock. For the good of all (farmers/ranchers/consumers), we need to start to adjust how we communicate.

