The quest for sustainable livestock production

By Lilian Schaer

Sustainability was the focus of LRIC’s 2015 annual general meeting on June 25.

CEO Tim Nelson introduced various presenters who gave updates on global, national and local sustainability initiatives in the livestock sector.

Ruairidh Petre, the Executive Director of the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (GRSB), said his organization is working towards a world where all aspects of the beef value chain are environmentally sound, socially responsible, and economically viable.

“We see innovation and use of tech as a key driver of efficiency and therefore a key driver to make the industry more sustainable,” he said. “The decisions we make as a roundtable need to lead to sustainable beef for all, not just create another niche."

The GRSB has seen a dramatic growth in membership since its launch in February 2012 with nine founding members to well over 70 today. Its stakeholders include non-government organizations like World Wildlife Fund, Rainforest Alliance, and Solidaridad, all the large global beef processors, animal health companies and banks, producer groups from large beef producing nations including Canada, retail members like Walmart and McDonald’s, and various national beef roundtables, including Canada’s.

Closer to home, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) is also increasing emphasis on sustainability, including research priorities under the OMAFRA research agreement with the University of Guelph, funding projects under Growing Forward 2, and creating sustainability-focused staff positions.

Ontario is part of a globally integrated beef business, said OMAFRA’s livestock sustainability specialist Christoph Wand in his presentation, which means issues that may become divisive in other production areas – like water use for feed production, livestock transportation or cull animals for example – will have impacts for Ontario as well.

“Sustainability needs to be science-based, not emotionally driven, and we will need to pay more attention to societal perceptions of animal production,” Wand said.

Maple Leaf Foods has come out of a prolonged period of restructuring with a renewed focus on sustainability in four key areas: advancing nutrition and health through sustainable and affordable food
made with simpler ingredients from humanely raise animals; working with community partners on long-term food security solutions; treating animals well by converting all of its sow facilities to loose housing and working with Dr. Temple Grandin to implement more humane processing methods; and reducing the impact of waste, water usage and climate change.

“We want to make sustainable affordable because it is the right thing to do and gives economic opportunity,” explained Peter Block of Maple Leaf Foods. “Sustainability is embedded in everything we do and we have the people and the passion to do this. The industry, frankly, has to change.”

For those seeking resources on sustainability, particularly in the food and beverage processing sector, Provision Coalition’s online sustainability portal is a valuable resource. The national organization was created in 2013 and provides resources, programming and advocacy for its members, including how to integrate sustainability into operations. Reducing food waste was an early emphasis, but that has moved to a larger focus of responsible sourcing.

“Everyone is responsible for the segments before them on the chain, so that creates new risks for everyone,” said Executive Director Cher Mereweather, adding that pressure is building food processors and retailers to know where products and ingredients are coming from.

“Food companies and retailers are the biggest purchasers of agricultural raw materials; 65 per cent of Ontario’s farm production is processed in Ontario,” she said. “For farmers, expect more requests on how you manage your operation, your environment, staff and operations – and can you produce that information?”

The Sustainable Farm & Food Plan currently in development should help farmers meet those requirements. Farm groups and others in the industry are working with Provision Coalition on an enhanced Environmental Farm Plan-style plan that will include the ability to manage animal welfare, food safety, farm business management and other existing systems through a single program.

“We want to make sustainability whole-farm and not crop by crop,” explained Dr. Gord Surgeoner, who is chair of the initiative’s steering committee. “Farmers manage the land not a single entity, and retail has said to us they'd rather have a sustainable farm plan not a crop by crop plan.”