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## Beef cattle welfare a front burner issue

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Canton, Okla. — On a recent sale day, Andy Hutchison arrived at the Pratt Livestock Auction with her husband Brad, a load of sale cattle and her laptop computer.

"I just take it so I can answer questions if I need to," she explains.

More than ever before, Hutchison likes to stay connected. Three months ago she started a Facebook page that now has nearly 2,000 members. She also blogs, maintains four websites and uses Twitter to send short messages with links to articles and additional information.

When livestock industry leaders rallied farmers and ranchers to use social media to take on animal rights groups and tell a positive story about farming and ranching, Hutchison took them seriously. Very seriously.

"This is urgent, and now I'm in it deep," she says. "I live on a 117-year-old ranch homesteaded by my great-grandfather and that gets me fired up. I don't want to give up. Whatever it takes to save my ranch, I will do it. I feel like I'm in a fight for our livelihood."

Hutchison, who is a member of the Cattlemen's Beef Board, remains convinced that most ranchers don't realize what they are up against. She is trying to galvanize the ranching community by informing them about public relations and political threats from adversarial interests.

Back in late April she took the train to Washington D.C. to attend the annual stakeholders meeting of the Animal Ag Alliance (the theme: "Truth, Lies and Videotape") and used her time on the rails to type up notes and send out info.

"I have a hundred pages of notes. Every speaker was so good," she said after returning to Northwest Oklahoma. "I just take my laptop with me, and it's been my way to educate producers."

But she also seizes every opportunity she has to engage with consumers and includes ranch history and education about daily ranch life on her website at [chainranchlady.com](http://chainranchlady.com).

During communal dining on the train to D.C., she struck up conversations and asked people what they knew about the Humane Society of the U.S. While most offered a favorable opinion at first, Hutchison gave them statistics on how little HSUS actually spends on animal shelters and new insight into the group's aims and tactics.

The encounters convinced her to print up a pocket-sized fact sheet she can hand out to people wherever she goes.

Addressing animal welfare concerns has moved front-and-center in many minds, as groups like HSUS have become more aggressive in dictating animal production methods using ballot initiatives and broadcasting negative images of the industry. In recent years a number of groups have released undercover video of alleged animal abuse at packing plants, hog farms, chicken farms, dairies and livestock auctions that have circulated widely on national news and on-line.

The groups have also been pressuring restaurant and grocery chains to impose stricter standards on livestock production methods.

Hutchison admits that in addition to defending animal agriculture from attacks, the industry needs to be proactive about "cleaning up the bad actors."

A number of positive steps are already underway.

Take the second annual International Symposium on Beef Cattle Welfare, recently presented by Kansas State University, which brought together animal care experts from across the country and the world.

Colorado State University's world-renowned animal welfare expert Temple Grandin opened the conference to a standing ovation. She is also slated to speak on improving cattle handling and welfare during the Colorado Cattlemen's summer convention June 15 in Pueblo.

One point of the conference was that animal care has been an important component of producer education for years, according to Dan Thomson, head of the K-State Beef Cattle Institute, which organized and hosted the conference.

He pointed out that the industry has made huge strides in improving animal well-being, but it just hasn't used conspicuous or politically advantageous terminology while doing it. Thomson also heads up the newly established North American Food Animal Well-being Commission-Beef, designed to serve as an independent voice to advance evidence-based and practical improvements in the care of beef cattle and "take the high road away from" groups like HSUS.

Heather Buckmaster, executive director of the Oklahoma Beef Council, agrees, pointing out that the Beef Quality Assurance program has incorporated animal welfare provisions for at least the last decade.

"It's something we've been focused on for a long time. Yes, there have been instances of very bad actions, but we had been working on this long before any animal activists were highlighting these issues. At the same time, we've increased performance, because good cattle care goes hand in hand with a healthy animal," she said.

Three years ago, beef councils created a training DVD for livestock auctions, which predates undercover video of alleged abuse at some facilities. More recently, K-State's Beef Cattle Institute teamed up with the Livestock Marketing Association to produce an Animal Care Training website ([www.animalcaretraining.org](http://www.animalcaretraining.org)) offering training video, testing and certification in specific areas of livestock handling.

Back at the ranch, in Oklahoma, Hutchison remains driven to do her part. Though not a "professional speaker," she has started addressing producer groups while continuing to send out a continuous stream of information and keep up with what's happening among activists.

It does take a serious time commitment. But she was motivated enough to teach herself how to use many of the social media platforms and spent the good part of a night building her own website.

She's modest about her accomplishments, but also makes it clear that what she's doing is achievable by others.

"It doesn't take that much time," she says. Then adds, "I just made myself do it."

She recommends the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's Masters of Beef Advocacy on-line training program as a great way for other ranchers to get up to speed on representing their industry in the digital media age. The program has already produced 1,366 graduates and another 1,484 students are in the pipeline.

"The great thing is I've made friends all across the United States, and we're all pulling together," Hutchison says. "In particular, it seems like a lot of women are jumping on board and making a difference by doing this."

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