

*TCFA represents its members in numerous ways, all designed to help create a positive business environment for cattle feeding.*

BY BURT RUTHERFORD

# TCFA At Work for You

**C**handler Keys, NCBA's lead lobbyist in Washington, D.C., has been called a lot of things during his 20 years representing the cattle industry in the political trenches. Now he can add "prophetic" to the list.

Speaking at the 2003 TCFA Annual Convention in Amarillo, Keys joined TCFA Vice President Ross Wilson on stage to discuss the major issues facing cattle feeders. Early on, a question came up about the May 2003 discovery of BSE in a Canadian cow.

"When the BSE problem hit in Canada, it's not an accident that our association and TCFA responded so quickly. We had a plan in place and we implemented the plan," Keys told cattle feeders. "We were the first organization in the country, faster than USDA, to hold a news briefing. We had more than 130 media outlets on the phone to get the real story out on BSE and what

we were doing." That calmed a lot of fears, Keys said, and further positioned the beef industry as a reliable and reputable news source. "And, I think, what really shows is if a government and an industry step forward as being honest and truthful, we can weather the storm of BSE as it relates to consumer demand," Keys said during the October convention.

On Dec. 23, 2004, just a few months after Keys' remarks at the TCFA convention, USDA announced BSE had been found in the United States. In the days and weeks following, Keys' words were indeed prophetic as NCBA, TCFA and others again stepped forward to explain, rationally and scientifically, the BSE situation and the risks involved. Consumers hardly wavered and the cattle market rebounded more quickly than many expected.

"We've got to be careful that we never mislead the public about BSE and

its impact," Keys said. "Let's be honest. The Europeans lied to their consumers. The Japanese lied to their consumers about this disease. If you continue to not tell the truth, it erodes consumer confidence. We can never allow that to happen."

And, in the straightforward and passionate manner that has become Keys' signature in Washington as well as in cattle country, he promised cattle feeders that NCBA will never mislead them, either, when dealing with controversial issues such as country-of-origin labeling. Citing the close work between NCBA and TCFA, including a meeting during the TCFA convention with Bob Goodlatte, chairman of the House Ag Committee, Keys and Wilson described the intense effort necessary to assure funding for a study by major business schools on concentration issues in the industry.

"TCFA has addressed this issue head on," Wilson said. TCFA committees and the Board of Directors have

invested many hours debating the issue, and TCFA leadership has worked with other state cattle organizations in a Four-State Working Group to find solutions.

"Previous studies have indicated there are reasons to be concerned, but have not identified any specifics that the industry can focus on," he said. That's why the need for an outside look at concentration issues is so important and why TCFA and NCBA helped obtain congressional funding for the proposed study by major business schools in the U.S.

"This is just another example of how your national organization and the state cattle associations that are affiliated are trying to find answers," Keys said. "We're not trying to tell you what you want to hear. We're trying to find answers so you can make good business decisions."

Michael Bezner, manager of the family-owned Bezner Beef feedyard at Texline, appreciates that. He finds his membership in both TCFA and NCBA to be very valuable. "We have a single, respected, well-thought-out voice for industry and government regulations and politics," he says, meaning that things like environmental regulations are reasonable, providing for environmental protection while not being so burdensome that they're unattainable in a cost-efficient manner.

#### FOREIGN TRADE

Another important charge that NCBA and TCFA take seriously is their work on members' behalf to create a strong business climate. Take foreign trade, for instance.

Political reality dictates that the U.S. is going to engage in trade with its allies. Taking an isolationist approach and fighting that reality is not only a disservice to members, because it's a

fight that's impossible to win, it eventually damages your political reputation and credibility, Keys said.

"So we started focusing on finding access to new markets," in an effort to find a reasonable trade balance between imports and exports. "And we're going to continue to grow foreign markets. But we have to be engaged in the trade debates. So we are at the table, kicking and screaming, pushing and shoving. We have to be engaged in the process and NCBA and TCFA are going to remain involved in trade negotiations. And I think at the end of the day, we're going to benefit greatly from it."

Political credibility is something NCBA and TCFA work hard at every day. And the efforts by Keys, Wilson and their staffs to represent cattlemen aggressively yet straight up have paid political dividends for many years in such areas as tax policy.

"We're called upon by the White House and by Congressional leaders on the Ways and Means and Finance Committees on a daily basis to help them figure out how to put tax pack-

ages together that benefit small business," Keys said. That kind of political credibility doesn't happen overnight and it must be continually protected.

#### ENVIRONMENT

Perhaps more than any other area, environmental regulations show the effect that actions in Austin or Washington can have at the feedyard gate. That's why TCFA has made environmental regulations one of its top priorities from the day it was formed in 1967 to now.

Laphe LaRoe appreciates that. LaRoe, manager of McLean Feedyard at McLean, can give a whole list of things that he finds hard to replace as a result of his TCFA and NCBA membership. Right at the top of that list are the many environmental services TCFA offers. He also lists health insurance, TCFA's Beef Safety and Quality Assurance Program<sup>SM</sup>, tax help, labor questions, employee safety and up-to-the minute market information.

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**"We're not trying to tell you what you want to hear. We're trying to find answers so you can make good business decisions."**

CHANDLER KEYS

"I have been in the feedyard business for the last 11 years and until coming to McLean Feedyard as manager, I had not realized the full value of being a TCFA member," he said. "It is like having your own human resource department and a special projects team right here at the feedyard."

That's important not only for him and his employees, but invaluable to his customers. "With TCFA handling that list, it gives me time to focus on production and most importantly, our customers at McLean Feedyard."

Bezner agrees. "TCFA does an awfully good job in all the things they do, but for me, the two things that stick out the most are the political voice and clout that we have as a group and the

without either adding additional responsibility to his staff or hiring another employee. "I definitely get to stay focused on more things I need to be doing by some of the slack that TCFA takes off us. For my customers, that makes me more efficient."

#### NATIONAL LEVEL

On the national level, Keys says managing environmental law and regulations is all about managing change, making sure it doesn't get too far out in front of the industry's ability to adjust.

"It's all got to be based on sound science. We cannot let the activists grab hold of the issue and put undue pressure on the cattle industry just because they don't like us." That, he

age it that we're working on, and that's a daily struggle."


#### IMPORTANT WORK

Much of the representation that TCFA and NCBA provide on behalf of their members is not headline stuff, Keys told cattle feeders. Take, for instance, the importance of a strong animal health infrastructure to help cattlemen deal with animal disease and food safety concerns.

"That's not the sexiest thing to talk about," Keys says. "We're not going to sell a lot of memberships on that, but if somebody doesn't take care of the infrastructure, keep the paint on the house if you will, to keep the disease diagnostic labs up-to-date and modern, USDA and our state animal health agencies won't have the budget and resources to protect you and your cattle. Think how important it is for NCBA and TCFA to support that."

#### PARTNERSHIP

TCFA and NCBA work very closely on many issues, Wilson said, and that close coordination has benefited everyone in Cattle Feeding Country. "I hope you know your dues dollars that help pay for these efforts have been and are being well spent," he said.

But, Keys added, trade associations are a lot like relationships. "You are not going to agree with the trade association 100% of the time. But you don't agree with your spouse 100% of the time either. You have to look at the positive things your trade associations do, this partnership and how it works. And I will guarantee one thing. Your money will not be ill spent. We will put it to these issues. And we're going to make things pop for you at the national level." 

DAVID BOWSER



**"I hope you know that your dues dollars that help pay for these efforts have been and are being well spent."**

ROSS WILSON

help that I get on environmental issues. I don't know how a feedyard my size would swing it without the environmental help available to us."

For his customers, that's important, because it means Bezner can stay focused on the things he needs to do

says, is a constant struggle in Washington to root out ulterior motives and make sure the debate sticks to science. "Everybody wants clean water, everybody wants clean air, everybody wants to protect endangered species. It's how you do it and how you man-