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Opinion

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Our View

Milk prices need clarity, consistency

Suppose you are a dairy farmer and having lunch at the local coffee shop. Between your hamburger and that piece of apple pie you have been eyeing, the person at the table next to you notes that your ballcap has the logo of your dairy cooperative.

To make conversation, he says: “I see by your cap that you’re a dairy farmer. How are things going?”

“Not great,” you say. “With milk prices way below the cost of production, we’ve burned through a lot of equity the past few years just keeping the lights on. Prices are finally rising after several years, but we’re still struggling.”

Then he says: “I’m sorry to hear that. I do my part as much as I can. I eat a bowl of ice cream every day, whether I need it or not.”

Then he asks this question: “By the way, how are milk prices determined?”

Your answer: “How much time do



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press File

The complicated Federal Milk Marketing Order system obscures prices while setting them.

you have? If I were to fully explain milk prices, we may have to stay around for supper, too. I’ll buy you that ice cream for dessert.”

In many ways, that’s a large part of the problem with the Federal Milk Marketing Order system that determines the minimum prices for much of the milk produced in the U.S. The 80-plus-year-old system is so complicated that milk prices appear to be primarily a product of the USDA. So many variables are involved that the

typical farmer knows what his milk check is worth, but only an economist can fully explain it.

That level of complication makes complete transparency in milk prices nearly impossible.

The low prices and the lack of transparency make it exceedingly difficult to run a dairy, as the closure of 2,731 dairies last year alone illustrates. That’s a loss of 7% of the nationwide total in one year, according to USDA.

If a dairy operator doesn’t know which factors give his milk the most value, how can he, or she, manage for a better outcome?

That, plus the fact that milk prices can vary dramatically from month to month, put the entire dairy industry on a roller coaster with no control.

A working group put together by the American Farm Bureau Federation has set out to improve the marketing orders. In its report, the group offers several suggestions for improving the system in ways that shift most of the

power to the farmers and away from handlers and processors.

That’s a good start. We might also suggest that a transparent and simplified system would help all sides understand where the highest value of milk is. Some farmers also see cooperatives and handlers as being at cross purposes with them, in part because they say they cannot realize the full value of their milk.

The dairy industry is constantly evolving. What might have worked as a way to attach a price to 100 pounds of milk may have been appropriate 80 years ago — or even 20 years ago — but it no longer accurately reflects the full value.

That in itself is unfair to all sides of the equation. Our hope is the Farm Bureau or another farmer-centric group can continue the work and come up with a better way to discover fair, consistent prices for milk.

We have seen the shortcomings of the current system — and the failures they helped cause.

Our View



Associated Press File

A loader piles soybeans at the Frontier Co-op in Schuyler, Neb. China says it will buy more U.S. soybeans but has shown no patience for those who criticize its politics.

Choosing between American values and Chinese commerce

Business with China can come with unpalatable provisions

We welcome last week’s news that China has agreed to buy between \$40 billion and \$50 billion in U.S. agriculture products as part of a “cease fire” in the ongoing trade war between the two countries.

President Trump has agreed to suspend planned hikes in tariffs on Chinese goods as talks continue. Unfortunately, the cease fire does nothing to eliminate punishing tariffs on U.S. goods that are already in place.

But talks continue.

China is an important trading partner for farmers and ranchers in the Pacific Northwest. Any improvement in trade relations between the United States and China is good news for farmers.

Yet our enthusiasm for this recent development is tempered by other actions of the Chinese government that made the news last week.

Exercising his First Amendment rights, Daryl Morey, the general manager of the Houston Rockets basketball team, tweeted his support for demonstrators in Hong Kong protesting a proposed ordinance that they fear would put residents and visitors to the region under the jurisdiction of the mainland Chinese communist government.

American basketball is very popular in China, and China is very important to the National Basketball Association.

Beijing responded by threatening to call off a series of planned NBA exhibition games in China. Morey pulled his tweet and apologized to the Chinese government. The Rockets disavowed Morey and the NBA groveled.

And the NBA isn’t alone. With billions of dollars at stake, just about everyone that does business in China works hard not to run afoul of the leadership.

Google and Facebook facilitate censorship. Hollywood tempers its scripts to avoid touchy subjects such as Tibet, the Dalai Lama, the Tiananmen Square massacre and the sovereignty of Taiwan. Apple has given a state-run company control of its iCloud operation in China, along with the encryption key that has given the government access to emails, text messages, photos and other data of Chinese customers.

Nike pulled the products of one of its affiliated brands from Chinese shelves after its principal designer tweeted support for Hong Kong protestors. In contrast, Disney remained silent when the actress playing the title role in its live-action movie “Mulan” tweeted her support for the police beating Hong Kong demonstrators.

The People’s Republic of China is a totalitarian, communist regime that doesn’t tolerate departures from the party line. It uses forced labor, it persecutes religious minorities, it imprisons dissenters in “re-education” camps, it is said to harvest the organs of detainees.

Unfortunately, it’s also an economic powerhouse that isn’t afraid to throw its weight around.

None of this seems to have anything to do with agricultural exports to China. To our knowledge, the Chinese have not put the arm on American farmers and ranchers to moderate their views.

But what happens if a social media-savvy soybean farmer acknowledges in a tweet that Chinese President Xi Jinping resembles Winnie the Pooh? (He does, and it’s a sore spot.) U.S. agriculture might have to make the choice between American values and \$24 billion in Chinese sales.

It’s a hard choice to contemplate.

Why I say, ‘Be neat, eat meat’

“Hey, be neat, no meat,” said television talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres in a short video she posted to social media on Sept. 17.

“It’s a great idea for the planet. It’s a great idea for your health. It’s a great idea for the animal’s health,” she said. On Instagram, people have watched the video almost 5 million times.

I like Ellen a lot.

I like her humor. I like her compassion. And I like her show, even though I don’t get to see it very often.

But I don’t like what she said about meat — and I replied to her comments in my own short video. To my surprise, my remarks got some attention. If I had known that this was going to happen, I would have done a better job of brushing my hair!

Yet I wanted to get across my main message. It’s OK to eat meat. You don’t need to feel guilty about it.

If you want to be a vegetarian, that’s fine by me. If you want to go even further and be a vegan, then I say: OK and good luck. Ellen ate a vegan diet for years, though now she apparently eats fish and eggs as well.

Food is a personal choice and I don’t want to change anyone’s preferences. I’m glad that our diverse food industry can satisfy so many different needs and desires.

But nobody should quit eating meat for the reasons Ellen listed. The production of meat doesn’t hurt the environment, the consumption of it is good for your health, and nobody cares more about the welfare of animals than the ranchers and farmers who tend to them every day.

I’m part of a ranch family in Montana. On my husband’s side, we go back five generations. We run a commercial beef operation that features high alpine grazing and a permanent mother herd, which means that some of our cows are with us for 15 years. We grow native grasses for food and use bulls for breeding.

Ranchers like me are often criticized for working with livestock because our animals emit greenhouse gases and contribute to climate change. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, however, the vast majority of greenhouse gases come from transportation (29%), electricity (28%), and industry (22%). All of agriculture accounts for only 9% — and livestock are just a fraction of this amount.

So we’re hardly a major problem. Electricity is a bigger threat, but Ellen can’t criticize its overuse because without electricity, nobody could watch her on television.

Meat is also an excellent source of protein and part of a healthy diet. It provides a good balance with vegetables, fruit, and other types of

GUEST
VIEW

Annabel
Morgan



RELATED VIDEOS AND LINKS

Ellen DeGeneres’ video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=halAc-8Jgdg4

Annabel Morgan’s video: www.instagram.com/tv/B2iCqXnFE0x/?utm_source=ig_embed

Global Farmer Network: www.globalfarmernetwork.org

food. It’s nutritious and delicious.

What bothers me most about Ellen’s anti-meat manifesto, however, is what she says about animals — and the casual implication that we ranchers treat our livestock with cruelty.

Nothing could be further from the truth. For one thing, unhealthy animals are unprofitable. We have a financial incentive to keep our livestock strong. Healthy animals bring us the best prices.

We also want them happy. This means creating a low-stress environment. We make sure that each animal has enough room to graze. When we’re around them, we try to talk in monotone voices to avoid alarming them. When we have to move them, we don’t force them where they don’t want to go but rather coax them in the right direction.

The bottom line is that we’re kind to them. We treat them well.

They don’t get sick very often, in part because we give them vaccinations, just as we give vaccinations to our kids. Nothing is fool-proof, of course, and sometimes they come down with ailments. When that happens, we put them under the care of veterinarians and work them back to health.

And when it comes time to slaughter them, their final moments are quick and painless. We care for them from birth to death.

So to Ellen, I say: Enjoy your vegetarian diet. And if you want to learn more about how we raise cattle on our farm and provide meat for those who enjoy it as part of their healthy diet, please come and visit us in Montana. You are welcome anytime.

To the meat-eaters whom she’s trying to guilt into changing their habits, I say: “Be neat, eat meat.”

Annabel and her family run a fifth-generation family cow/calf ranch in Gallatin County, Mont. The ranch, established in 1880, consists of high alpine grazing and lower hay ground. Annabel is a guest author for the Global Farmer Network, www.globalfarmernetwork.org