

OUR VIEW

Beef price solution uses magical math

President Biden wants to help beef producers get better prices for their cattle, while at the same time he wants to help consumers get a break on high beef prices at the grocery store.

The culprits on both ends of the transaction, according to Biden, are the four big meatpackers that control 80% of the market.

Beef producers, pressed by drought to reduce herds, pushed up supply, pushing down live cattle prices. At the same time, processors say they are struggling to keep plants operating at capacity because of COVID regulations and worker illness. Additionally, distributors are having difficulty getting product to retailers because of a shortage of warehousing and trucking. As a result, the price of retail beef has gone up because supply is below demand.

Their troubles aside, processors are in a bit of an economic sweet spot at the moment, and in the president's sights.

"In too many industries, a handful of giant companies dominate the market," Biden said in a virtual press conference last week.

"And too often they use their power to squeeze out smaller competitors and stifle new entrepreneurs, making our economy less dynamic and giving themselves free rein to raise prices, reduce options for consumers or exploit workers," he said.

The meat industry is a "textbook example," he said.

Biden's solution is to put up \$1 billion to expand independent processing capacity, strengthen rules that protect producers and consumers, promote vigorous and fair enforcement of existing competition laws and increase transparency in cattle markets.

Problem solved? Probably not. Certainly not in the immediate future.

We support expanding processing capacity that caters to smaller producers, but the economics of the meatpacking business don't favor a dozen or so new large, independent packing plants competing for the big retail markets.

Getting these plants sited, permitted and built will take years. Assuming that happens, any positive impact they could conceivably have on increasing producer prices and reducing consumer prices would be far in the future.

Economists who have commented on the plan are skeptical. It is unclear if the capacity of these yet-to-be-built plants will be significant enough to sway the markets on either side of the packinghouse door to increase producer prices and lower retail prices.

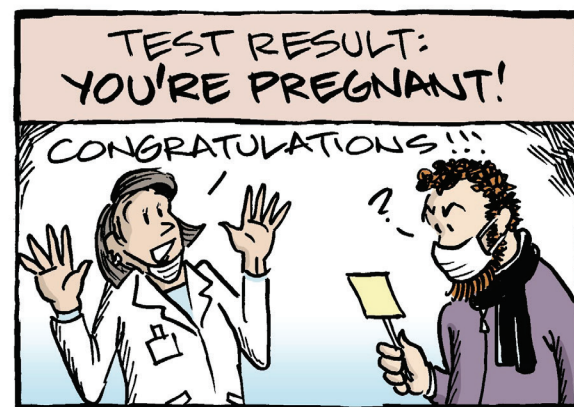
And consumers have to ask if it's possible for meatpackers to pay more for cattle and at the same time drop the price on the retail side. That sounds like something the established players could weather longer than the startups.

We agree that there should be more competition, and that existing anti-trust rules should be enforced. We also think producers need more price transparency.

Nothing that the president suggested will cause retail prices to fall anytime soon, if ever. Nor will they help livestock producers in the short run. But the president's announcement did help shift focus from other uncomfortable headlines.

Easy answers depend on a lot of magical thinking, and short memories.

SIGNS AN OREGON COVID TEST SITE MIGHT BE FAKE...



COMMENTARY

Holding hope for radical change

The new year has begun with melancholy, as our country sees the pandemic reach new heights. Meanwhile our crises of climate, democracy, and inequality seem more entrenched than ever.

All this uncertainty is taking a toll, but uncertain times are far from unprecedented. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to an equally uncertain time and found hope in recognizing the necessity of radical change.

As we celebrate the national holiday dedicated to King, I always encourage people to take some time to look at his writings — and I especially do this year. In moments like these, I like to revisit one of King's last essays, "A Testament of Hope," which sounds as relevant today as the day he wrote it.

"Whenever I am asked my opinion of the current state, I am forced to pause," King wrote. "It is not easy to describe a crisis so profound that it has caused the most powerful nation in the world to stagger in confusion and bewilderment."

Sound familiar? "Today's problems are so acute because the tragic evasions and defaults of several centuries have accumulated to disaster proportions," King continued. These inter-related problems, he continued, have "now merged into a social crisis of almost stupefying complexity."

King specifically named "war, inflation, urban decay, white backlash, and a climate of violence" alongside "race relations and poverty" as the cascading crises of his day. To that list we could add the pandemic and climate crisis today.



Dedrick Asante-Muhammad

Even more than half a century ago, King believed that the time for small, incremental changes had passed. "The luxury of a leisurely approach to urgent solutions — the ease of gradualism — was forfeited by ignoring the issues for too long," he wrote.

"When millions of people have been cheated for centuries, restitution is a costly process. Inferior education, poor housing, unemployment, inadequate health care — each will require billions to correct," King warned. "Justice so long deferred has accumulated interest and its cost for this society will be substantial in financial as well as human terms."

But for a country weighed down by segregation, inequality, and the Vietnam War, King also knew that the costs of injustice were greater — something that feels even more true today.

"If we look honestly at the realities of our national life, it is clear that we are not marching forward," he wrote. "We are groping and stumbling; we are divided and confused."

In the face of these "deeply rooted evils" and "systemic rather than superficial flaws," King offered a remedy: the "radical reconstruction of society itself" — and praised the dissenters who called for it, often at great cost.

"Today's dissenter tells the complacent majority that the time has

come when further evasion of social responsibility in a turbulent world will court disaster and death," he said. "America has not yet changed because so many think it need not change, but this is the illusion of the damned."

Although King knew that change wouldn't be easy, he was actually hopeful about it.

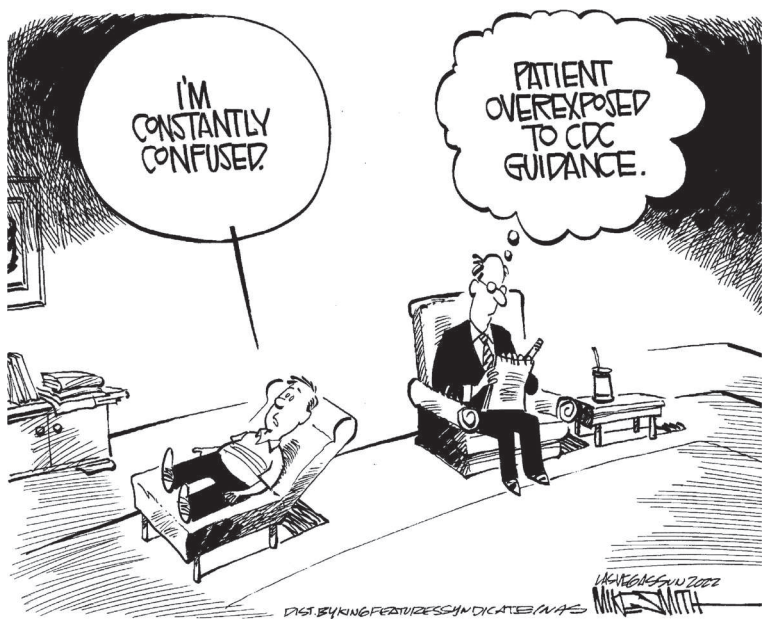
"Humanity has the capacity to do right as well as wrong," King affirmed. "The past is strewn with the ruins of the empires of tyranny, and each is a monument not merely to our blunders but to our capacity to overcome them... That's why I remain an optimist, though I am also a realist, about the barriers before us."

King's "Testament of Hope" is based on a realist's assessment of the need for political, economic, and moral change. King is clear-eyed that America must embrace radical change — which won't come from the powerful but from the "naive and unsophisticated."

Hope in radical change, for many of us, seems out of place during this time of tension. Yet there has been incredible change over the last few years. Rather than return to our dysfunctional past, King's "Testament of Hope" points to the need to embrace and advance that change.

As we begin 2022 I find this message as important as ever.

Dedrick Asante-Muhammad is the chief of race, wealth, and community at the National Community Reinvestment Coalition and an associate fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies. This op-ed was distributed by OtherWords.org.



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Let's draw together in the new year

To the editor:
Many use this month to reflect on what we went through in 2021. For many, and certainly me, it was a time of trials and transition, not only for our nation, but for families.

I tried to keep my spirit in a "thanksgiving" mode. We may be all going through this new wilder-

ness journey, but God has been along with me, for every step. It was the thing that kept me moving forward, and I pray all that read this can attest to their own life as being so blessed.

My true friends also stayed close, and cried when I cried and laughed when I laughed. A word, a hug, an "I love you" helped keep me centered in what was important.

Despite a nation in crisis, let's

all draw together, as Grant County people tend to do, and look forward to the new year with gratitude for God's favors. Welcome new beginnings, and be blessed to know we are all called the children of God.

Show me, Lord, where you want me to go, what you want me to do to be a blessing to others, and give you all the glory. Amen.

Mya Ennis
John Day

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