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Transparency Scholarship

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A More Transparent Future

In the last decade, the demand for sustainable, safe and healthy food has increased dramatically. Consumers want to know that the food they eat is grown in an environmentally friendly and humane way. They are told by the media to source food with labels such as 'sustainable', 'hormone free', 'organic' and 'grass fed' without knowing what these phrases actually mean. This is where producers need to step in and become transparent; showing consumers that they are able to provide them with safe food. If the agriculture industry does not succeed at being transparent there is a risk of consumers sourcing their food elsewhere, leading to little demand for Saskatchewan grown products. This could cause a huge loss in both market prices and the economy.

One of the ways the agriculture industry can become more transparent is by showing our youth the truth about the industry. I grew up in a large farming community, however at the High School I attend, many kids do not understand the truth of food production. I have had conversations with many of these students that are sucked into the propaganda on social media, telling them that agriculture is inhumane and harmful to the environment. If students from a small community don't know how food is sourced, chances are people from larger urban centres do not know the truth about agriculture either. These students are scared of the food they eat, and make choices based on emotion. They look for other sources of food that make them feel socially

responsible. Youth across the globe are future Saskatchewan consumers. They need to know that Saskatchewan produce is safe and reliable, and this can be done by becoming more transparent.

Growing up, I attended many different Ag Expos. What I learned there was great, however, the industry could take the information one step further by informing our youth that the foods they eat are in fact safe and are raised in a humane way. Knowing milk comes from cows and wheat is used to make bread is all very important, but they need to further understand that the milk they drink and bread they eat is good for them and is produced in a safe manner. I had a conversation with a peer and they were disgusted that I drank milk. I asked them why they found milk so disgusting and they responded by telling me that milk is “cow pus”. They saw a video online supported by an animal rights group showing a dairy cow’s infected udder. I told her that all producers have very high standards for their product and would not ever send unsafe milk to market. Furthermore, producers care deeply for their livestock and would do whatever it takes to get that cow back to a healthy condition. This story shows how important it is that we teach the basics of food production while being transparent; showing everything is done humanely for the betterment of the land, animals and the final product. We can do this by creating agriculture videos and posting them on all forms of technology. By adding quick, interesting videos on platforms like Instagram, Tik Tok and Snapchat that appeal to my generation, they might catch the attention of youth and make them interested in learning the rest of the story. The next part is making easily accessible and interesting web pages linked to the videos to carry the rest of the information on food production. Becoming transparent to the world starts with putting the truth out there in an attractive way. We need to share the wonderful world of agriculture, showing every step taken from planting the seed to the food in the store and dispelling myths about the industry.

A program dedicated to making Saskatchewan beef more transparent is Verified Beef Production Plus (VBP+). Erika Stewart, Provincial Coordinator for VBP+ answered some questions for me regarding transparency. When asked what the aim of VBP+ is, Stewart answers, “To instil consumer confidence in Canadian Beef and how producers are raising that beef”. This is done by Standard Operating Procedures that producers must incorporate in their operations before they can become members of VBP+. To ensure credibility, a third party auditor looks over their operations to ensure that producers are following the procedures. Erika states, “Public trust is an important component to the business of raising cattle in today's society”. VBP+ goal is to have producers be completely transparent in their operations, keeping records of what is done to each and every animal. When an animal is sick, an antimicrobial is used. The producer takes notes of the date treated, product used, animal identification, dose and the withdrawal date. The purpose behind this practice is to become more transparent, so the public can see that producers are in fact doing what is best for the animal. Stewart adds, “The VBP+ program is important to the Canadian Beef Industry because it holds Canadian Beef producers to the highest level of operating standards”. VBP+ is linked to the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef. Their objective is to have beef operations produce “socially responsible, environmentally sound and economically viable products that prioritize the planet, people, animals and progress”. VBP+ is a great program for all cattle producers to incorporate into their operations. Our ranch is joining VBP+ this Spring so we can become more transparent; aligning ourselves with what consumers want.

Another way that farmers and ranchers can create transparency is by attending Farmers Markets and Trade Shows, promoting their product and showing the public in greater depth how they grow their produce. This creates a personal connection to the agriculture industry. Having a

face and a name connected with the food on their table creates a sense of trust and safety. The agriculture industry has already taken great strides by putting pictures of producers on the packaging of produce. People love to gather together around food. Knowing where that food comes from and that it was produced in a safe and sustainable way is the ultimate goal behind becoming more transparent.

In conclusion, there are many different ways that producers can become more transparent in their farm and ranch operations. Producers need to realize the importance of becoming transparent to the consumers around the world. Helping youth understand that Saskatchewan agriculture is safe from a young age will greatly benefit the future of the industry. Whether producers join a program like Verified Beef Production Plus or go out and explain to community members the truths of food production, we all need to put our best effort into making consumers feel safe with the food that they eat. As a future farmer and rancher, I will spend my life dedicated to growing sustainable and reliable produce that I can be proud of. I will also do whatever I can to make my operation more transparent; not hiding anything from the public so they can be assured that Saskatchewan produce is safe.