

Logger defends rural way of life

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GUELPH — An American logger received a standing ovation at a local farm conference Thursday for saying rural communities need to proclaim they're good stewards of the land to rebuff vocal business-hating environmental activists claiming otherwise.

“Society doesn't dislike us: they don't know us,” keynote speaker Bruce Vincent told a packed audience at the Ontario Farm Animal Council and AGCare annual meeting.

But while activists have held sway with the public for years with a message of unrelenting environmental degradation, there's a rising generation of youth who

are turning away from doomsday scenarios and don't hate free enterprise, Vincent said.

“They're tired of the doom and gloom.”

They need to hear more vocally from rural communities engaged in sound stewardship as they pursue careers in farming, logging, mining and fishing, Vincent told the Guelph Place audience in an often-humorous speech about the tribulations of operating a family business in an era where Hollywood humanizes animals and demonizes rural residents the critters contend with, like an animated Bambi fleeing mankind.

The rural sector, he stressed, represents millions of Canadians with a potentially powerful voice that could bring better balance to the public debate over resource stewardship.

“You've got to stand together,” Vincent said.

The message resonated with Ontario Fur Breeders' Association director Kirk Rankin, who raises mink in St. Marys, Ont.

“He speaks with passion and I one hundred per cent believe what he says,” Rankin said, concurring that rural Canadians love the land and want to sustain it for future generations.

Rankin added that the public isn't dumb.

“They just haven't heard our story.”

That also reverberated with Nancy Comber of Milton, a member of the Halton Region Federation of Agriculture and Ontario Beekeepers' Association. She noted environmental activism at times threatens farming, citing as an example proposals in her region to create a natural heritage protected area that would limit agricultural growth.

Why is this being considered when southern Ontario already has a large greenbelt?

“We're wondering that, too,” Comber said.

Vincent, whose family business is in Libby, Montana, said American society today sees the rural way of life in a negative light. He recalled when he appeared before a university crowd years ago representing his family logging operation.

“They looked at me as an axe-murdering Neanderthal.

“My hope is you’re not going to have to repeat our mistakes,” he continued, referring to allowing vocal critics of the rural economy to hog the public podium over issues like water quality and animal welfare, despite continuous advances in farming operations.

“We should be celebrating the progress we’ve made,” Vincent said.