



Alumbaugh: The Last Best Places; the Last Best People (Oct 16, 2008)

Every now and then, a person will come along who is so compelling, he or she presses others to step out of their comfort zone and take action for a worthwhile cause. Such was the case last week when Bruce Vincent addressed members of the National Pork Producers Council's Pork Alliance in Des Moines, Iowa.

Vincent is a logger from Montana, but he's not the quintessential stereotype. He didn't have a red plaid shirt, or a beard or logging boots. Instead, this spokesperson for rural America is well-dressed, clean-cut and articulate, with piercing eyes and a voice filled with urgency. Still, you might think, what is a logger doing talking to pork producers? Here's a clue: Ever hear of a tree-hugger?

Twenty-plus years ago, before activists even thought about livestock production, they had their efforts pointedly focused on the logging industry. The outcry was for protection of the spotted owl, the grizzly bear and other creatures, as well as an end to the logging industry, which they perceived to be detrimental to endangered species.

The issue came to a head when an "expert" came to the local high school and told community members that grizzly bears were going to be re-introduced into the area. While the expert admitted it wasn't known how many grizzlies had been in the area, or were in the area now, or should be brought into the area, none of that mattered. His point was alarmingly clear when he said: "This isn't an opinion poll – we're mandated by the Federal Endangered Species Act."

It was a sobering moment, explained Vincent. At that point, he and others in the small Montana community realized they would have to become involved in the process. If this was going to happen, and it obviously was, then at least they could help design a program that would allow people and grizzlies to co-habit with minimal harm to both. He has served on the committee for the grizzly bear community involvement plan for 20 years.

Many politicians aren't sensitive to the way rural people live and the jobs they do, but because so few people live there, policies deemed worthy by the urban populace are enacted. "Our rural population is disposable," says Vincent. "And there are places paying the price."

The logging industry is a good example, he explains. Forests are being managed, but not for consumption. Clear-cutting is discouraged (even though science shows the advantages of controlled cutting and burning), so there are often 500 trees on an acre when there should be 50, says Vincent. As a result, forest fires can rage out of control for days, fueled by the thick underbrush and groundcover. "There is a thin line between environmental sensitivity and environmental insanity," he adds.

The American environmental effort is now part of who we are. Some of the laws, and the activist groups that pushed for them, are over 50 years old, and they're beginning to show their age. In other words, some of these groups are not collectively cognizant of how agriculture has evolved, nor do they care. But, suggests Vincent, "They can sell one product – fear – and make billions."

These activist groups are a business, he continues, and they're going to find industries to be their "piñatas." The next two targets appear to be water and animals, including animal rights, animal husbandry and food safety.

There is a spark of encouragement, however. Vincent believes the public is tired of hearing what's wrong, and hungers for knowledge of what's right. "We need hope instead of fear for our planet; we need resolution instead of conflict."

This passionate speaker then provided three compelling take-home points. First, he says, "Democracy works, but it's not a spectator sport. There is tremendous power in multi-sector support of a single issue."

His second point: "When people lead, leaders follow. If you don't talk to your leaders about how to protect your industry, you'll be protected right out of business."

Finally, Vincent says, "The world is run by those who show up." It's important for people with a vested interest to get involved in the process. We need to identify the policymakers who understand our issues and are willing to fight for them. We, in turn, need to support those individuals as well.

Members have to be able to articulate their principles, and be willing to share their ideals with policymakers. We would be well-served to focus on the relationships and how agricultural efficiency has helped other industries, individuals, and the environment.

"Engage with other industries that have a vested interest," asserts Vincent. "If we're going to survive, we're going to have to become activists for our own industries. We have to publicly support the right candidates; we have to join the chambers of commerce and other community groups. When this happens, we have other people willing to fight for us."

"Everybody needs to be a ripple, and together we become a wave," he continues. "There is a way to save the last best places, but it will take the last best people to do it."

Do you care about agriculture and your business? Do you want to preserve it for future generations? If so, embrace this call to action, and help protect your livelihood by opening the door of understanding to urban dwellers and others who may lack an understanding of farming and pork production. You may be surprised by the positive outcome.

Editor's Note: Kudos to the personnel at the National Pork Producers Council for bringing in this dynamic speaker - you will be able to hear his message at the Iowa Pork Congress next January, so look for more in upcoming commentaries. This commentary is sponsored by Boehringer Ingelheim Animal Health, Inc.