

# Iowans work to restore sales of U.S. beef to Asia

By Heather Lilienthal

Stan Zylstra can't help but grit his teeth and slightly shake his head in exasperation when the letters "BSE" are spoken.

The northwest Iowa cattleman is still in disbelief that one case of BSE, discovered in the United States from a single imported cow back in December 2003, has caused so much turmoil in the global beef market. Although U.S. cattlemen raise the safest beef in the world, places like South Korea and Japan are still cautiously venturing back into the market.

That's why Zylstra is here in Asia, taking his message about U.S. beef quality and safety to trade officials, embassy representatives, meat buyers and packers in South Korea and Japan.

Beef is Zylstra's business, and he's concerned about the trade restrictions stemming from the bans in countries such as South Korea and Japan. While those markets have reopened to U.S. beef, the restrictions, such as not accepting cattle under 30 months of age, are keeping profits tight for cattlemen.

"Exports are a key component of our sales," said Zylstra, who also serves on the Iowa Beef Industry Council (IBIC). "There is so much growth potential, and that hiccup in 2003 is still affecting us."

## Building back

The hiccup was substantial. For example, according to the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF), the Korean market was the third largest beef export market for volume and value in 2003, buying nearly 70 percent of its beef from the United States that year. It nearly disappeared by 2004, and by 2009, the United States provided only 27 percent of Korea's imported beef.

In both Seoul and in Tokyo, Zylstra raised his concern during meetings with meat processors and trade officials. "We need to address that misinformation out there and share our stories," he said. "The demand for our product is here; we're seeing it in information about the Asian consumers."

In Korea, the USMEF engaged in an aggressive image campaign targeting mothers and housewives who account for most of the food buying decisions in the country. Initial survey results showed that 43 percent said they bought beef based on country of origin, 64 percent associated U.S. beef with BSE and 85 percent who refuse to purchase U.S. beef say its because of distrust in U.S. beef hygiene and safety.

## Better news

That makes Zylstra grind his teeth. But there is good news.

The tide does seem to be turning regarding the perception of U.S. beef in Korea. One of USMEF's charges was to improve consumers' experience with beef and to reassure them of its safety.

One of the group's most successful efforts was just a click away: online word of mouth. In other words, they enlisted the help of power bloggers.

"Power bloggers have near celebrity status," explained Min Park, with the USMEF. "They are powerful influencers, and people relate to them and trust them."

The other facet of the campaign was built upon trust, something the USMEF is working to build in Korea and Japan. "We hope to continue developing that trust and confidence in U.S. beef," said Zylstra.

Roger Brummett of Bedford, another member of the delegation, agreed. "There is tremendous potential here, especially in Korea as their economy strengthens and the consumers have a higher standard of living and seek better sources of food for taste and protein," commented Brummett.

Being in both countries has allowed Brummett, Zylstra and the entire Iowa group to better understand the countries' cultures.

"We can see that they are densely populated areas and do not have the agricultural systems or natural resources to feed everyone," said Brummett. "That's why we need our Iowa producers to understand the market, the culture and the opportunity we have here."