

NEW YEAR, NEW DECADE

“An optimist stays up until midnight to see the New Year in. A pessimist stays up to make sure the old year leaves.” (Bill Vaughn)

Some of my agricultural friends accused me of being somewhat naive in my last column as I wrote of the abundant season coming to a close. I reported that our hay barns and grain bins are full, gardens and orchards produced plentifully and most of us will be well fed for the next year because of the abundance that has come forth from mother earth. I confess I did intentionally focus on the positive. Life is more pleasant when we do that.

In fairness to some agriculturists, 2009 has been the most difficult year some can ever remember. Dairy, poultry and pork producers, especially, have been forced to eat equity they have spent years accumulating. Because of difficult economic conditions on dairies, many alfalfa growers have experienced difficulty selling their hay. Grain growers did not receive 2008 prices either.

As we enter a new year and a new decade we can choose to be optimistic or pessimistic. Any one of us can make a case for either position. Good judgment, however, requires we face the future from the starting point of realism. That requires a concerted effort on our parts to be informed, know our resources, consider our options, make wise decisions, give our best efforts, and happily live with the results.

Successful leaders and business managers often go through the process of defining their values, clarifying their mission, and identifying driving and restraining forces. Since farmers and ranchers are managers of a business, profitable proprietors will go through this defining process again and again. It often takes more time than some are willing to give, but the results of forced evaluation and forward thinking can be valuable as critical management decisions are made.

I participated in such a meeting a few weeks ago as participants discussed strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to their specific agricultural industry. There were times during the discussion when associates became defensive or cynical. At other times, the reactions were reflective and insightful. The process was painful for some, but the dialogue resulted in identifying specific actions that could enhance the likelihood of personal satisfaction and economic success for participating producers.

I was intrigued with some of the strengths identified during the session. First on their list was the fact that they know each other and like each other. Since these producers get along well, they often share their knowledge of the industry in cooperative ways. They also identified excellent support from the University, Utah Department of Agriculture, other supporting agencies, nutritionists, veterinarians and their own commodity organization. Relative isolation from larger livestock populations, an abundance of natural resources, and a willingness to volunteer were also a few of the identified strengths.

When asked to focus on weaknesses, some quickly identified negative cash flow as their biggest challenge. Lack of markets and distance to markets is also a weakness, though isolation from larger populations of livestock was considered one of their strengths. Another perceived weakness dealt with

the small percentage of our population that understands the process of production agriculture. The apparent deficiency of community knowledge for raising crops and livestock proved to be one of the major weaknesses producers identified during the discussion.

Opportunities came from carefully reviewing the list of identified weaknesses. We had a lively discussion on a multitude of ways of educating consumers on how food gets from the farm to their fork. We all realized that it was up to us to promote our industry and the product of our toil. No one else would do it for us. We also renewed our efforts to explore marketing options that may not have been considered feasible only a few years ago. There was added optimism as we considered opportunities.

Excessive government mandates and regulations along with animal welfare issues virtually summarized the list of threats this group of agricultural producers believe they are facing. They considered contact with their elected government officials to be somewhat fruitful, but expressed complete despair in dealing with PETA, the Humane Society and other extreme animal welfare organizations.

I left the meeting believing that an understanding of reality can lead one to optimistic action or to pessimistic despair. We can always find plenty of dark clouds that cause concern and apprehension, but with close observation, most of those clouds also have a silver lining. I may indeed be somewhat naïve when assessing our local agricultural conditions, but I prefer to look for the positive. Optimists are often as wrong as pessimists, but they sure have a lot more fun. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to one and all.