

Ask a FARMER

Q: What affects could meat substitutes have on cattle farms?

A: Switching to plant-based meat substitutes will have an impact on cattle farms with a disruption in beef production. It also confuses consumers who may not realize the trade-offs.

As I look back on the topics covered over the past several years, this one has to be the most complicated and most concerning.

As a cattle farmer, I question why people think a meat substitute is needed? We have surpluses of feed and livestock and the trend is toward more natural food products – not less. People want foods made with fewer additives, less processed foods, and more fresh food.

Let's compare the labels of a ground beef patty to a plant-based patty.

96% Lean Beef – All natural beef that is ground up and is 96 percent lean.

Beyond Meat Patty – Water, Pea Protein Isolate, Expeller-Pressed Canola Oil, Refined Coconut Oil. Contains 2% or less of the following: Cellulose from Bamboo, Methylcellulose, Potato Starch, Natural Flavor, Maltodextrin, Yeast Extract, Salt, Sunflower Oil, Vegetable Glycerin, Dried Yeast, Gum Arabic, Citrus Extract (to protect quality), Ascorbic Acid (to maintain color), Beet Juice extract (for color), Acetic Acid, Succinic Acid, Modified Food Starch, Annatto (for color). *Source: Beyond Meat via #CattleTales (See next page).*

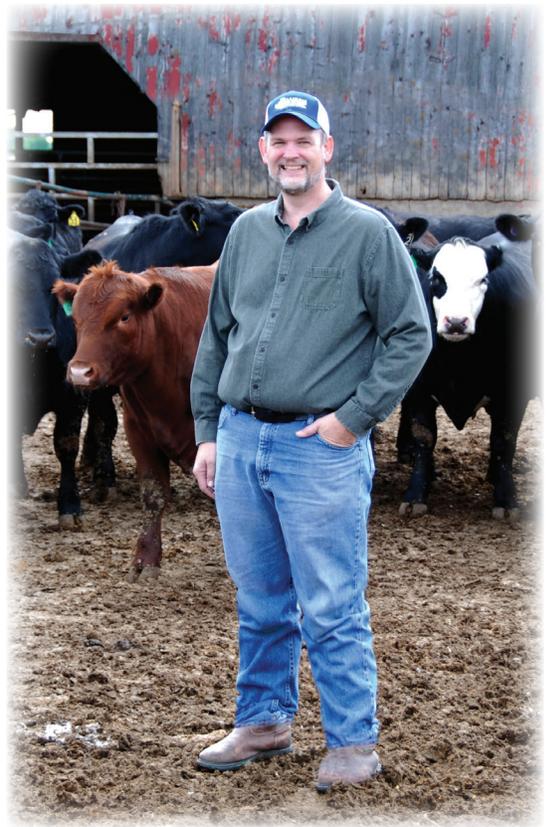
It is hard for me to relate to the consumer that says they want only organic, free-range chicken and cage free eggs but turn right around and say they prefer only Beyond Meat burgers. In my mind they are complete opposites. The animals of this earth were provided for our sustenance. Why should one be evaluated differently than the other?

Obviously, there would be little need for livestock to be raised, if there is not one ingredient of the meat substitute that comes from an animal.

This will disrupt the need for grain, protein, forage and animal husbandry nationwide if people switch to non-beef alternatives. Economic fallout could drop values of pasture and grain production lands, land values, building and equipment, and drop farm income revenues severely.

Here's another point to consider: organic production uses the manure from livestock as their main source of fertilizer. Chicken litter is the king of nitrogen; hog and cattle manure are full of phosphorus and potassium as well as nitrogen. If we didn't produce equivalent quantities of livestock, it would be difficult to keep the organic grain and produce farms operating at current levels.

Yet some economists say that the world demand for meat proteins will soon exceed the available supply with the ever-rising population and standard of living. Plant-based alternatives amount to the equivalent of just 1% of the total volume of meat sold in the U.S. With current growth expectations, the meat substitute's market share forecasts are between 5 and 10%. As total world demand for beef increases, this may not cause a reduction in real beef demand as the substitutes help fill in the gaps with niche marketing.



Roy Plote is a sixth generation farmer from Leland. He farms with his brother, raising beef cattle, corn, soybeans, wheat and hay. Roy and his wife have two sons.

Proponents of the meat substitutes explain that just as China and many Far East countries are suffering through the African Swine Fever epidemic, there could be a widespread cattle disease that would hinder beef production and we need to be prepared with alternatives.

The real story behind meat substitutes. People are choosing them for various reasons (being vegetarian, cost, ethnic backgrounds) but oftentimes are paying a premium. My gut tells me meat substitutes were designed to create value out of some easily stored, shelf-life sensitive products – aka: pea, soy, or potato proteins.

Our son, Ethan, a senior at the U of I, is faced with choosing between coming home to farm, finding a corporate job/career, or meshing the two together to buy time to see where he wants to focus our farm in the future. Will livestock still be a viable part of our farm? Time will tell. ■