

Rancher moves 'Beyond Beef'

Former lobbyist challenges farmers

By Dawn Johnson

Farm writer

MILAN — Sticks and stones may break Howard Lyman's bones, but names, he says, will not hurt him.

Nor will it stop the fourth-generation cattle rancher-turned-environmental activist from "spreading the word" about the role of agriculture, specifically cattle production, in the destruction of the environment worldwide.

"They can call me all the names they want, but, if I can save three out of six family farmers from going out of business by the next century, I'll be one happy camper," says Mr. Lyman.

The 54-year-old was the chief lobbyist for the National Farmers Union, one of the most influential farm organizations on Capitol Hill, until last year, when he accepted an offer by longtime environmental activist Jeremy Rifkin to head up the Beyond Beef campaign.

In his book "Beyond Beef: The rise and fall of the cattle culture," published last year, Mr. Rifkin blames world environmental and economic problems on beef consumption.

The goals of the Beyond Beef campaign, which are based on the book, are to reduce meat consumption by 50 percent, replace meat in people's diets with more fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and confine existing meat consumption to organically grown beef and meat products.

Mr. Lyman said his decision to join the campaign has earned him the scorn of cattle

producers and the skepticism of environmental activists, but it is a decision he made wholly for his own beliefs.

In an interview with The Rock Island Argus and The Dispatch on Wednesday, he recalled that once he employed 30 people and raised 5,000 head of cattle annually on "several thousand acres" of the family farm.

"I was the Donald Trump of cattle ranchers," he said.

However, disillusioned by the economic upheaval of the 1980s and stricken with a spinal tumor that threatened him with paralysis, Mr. Lyman decided that the way he farmed — with chemicals and pesticides — was wrong.

Today he eschews meat and animal products in any form and challenges his former fellow cattle growers to assess their role in their economic and environmental health.

"You can kid yourself into believing you work environmentally by applying only (the chemicals) you need and saying you care about your family first. But fact is, you aren't part of a single segment. You're part of a circle that's interconnected," he said of farmers who disagree with his philosophy.

Mr. Lyman says American farmers have less than a decade to "change their ways" before use of chemicals and pesticides puts them further in debt and out of business.

"The future of agriculture is being crushed in a vice of chemicals and debt," he said citing projections that indicate that five out of six commercial farmers will go out of business by the next century.

He said farmers must take control of marketing their products by forming their own cooperatives.



Howard Lyman