



No environmental sin in beef production

I believe most people do not have an exact idea of how big the beef production chain is in Brazil: with a herd of approximately 198 million head, widely considered the largest commercial herd in the world, generating millions of jobs throughout production, from the farm to the plant, and accounting for 8% of the GDP, in addition to the exports of meat and leather that together surpassed US\$ 8.5 billion in 2008, the beef production chain is crucially important to the Brazilian economy. Perhaps owing to the unequivocal success of the industry, whose expansion over the last 50 years has been spectacular, livestock farming and the slaughter and meat processing industry are coming under increasing pressure regarding socio-environmental sustainability. It is a fact that the industry grew dizzyingly and in a disorganized fashion in recent years, and that informal production widely prevailed in both farming and slaughterhouses, and that in the not-too-distant past, there was not the slightest environmental concern in Brazil, considering that until the 1980s financial and tax benefits were offered for the expansion of livestock farming to States in the Mid-Western and Amazon regions. Possible past wrongdoing cannot be allowed to jeopardize the search for improvement for the future, but denying the current reality or even trying to eliminate it overnight is sheer utopia. Therefore it is time to promote the modern, sustainable structuring of this industry according to the socio-environmental legislation in force. This is what the modern, organized beef industry wishes to achieve through the strategic action of ABIEC, the Brazilian Association of Beef Exporters.

The recent campaign to demonize the industry being promoted irresponsibly by sensationalist NGOs and by some journalists with an ideological bias does not present an intelligent solution to the future, a solution to match the necessary expansion of food production increasingly required by the world with the common goal of all sane Brazilians to preserve the environment, above all the Amazon Forest. I do not see that these NGOs have any moral authority to address the environmental subject as they have been doing, since they do not hold exclusive rights to a concern about this subject, much less are they searching for a long-lasting and rational solution. Starving in a Botanical Garden does not seem to be a desirable scenario for the almost 30 million Brazilians living in that vast, impoverished region in Brazil today.

It is not prohibited to make mistakes in life. Lying, inventing fallacies and being inconsiderate should be prohibited. Enough of the hypocrisy and the critical mediocrity of these foreign NGOs that wander around our country with impunity! Let's talk instead about the facts and data that interest the Brazilian population: According to recent data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics – IBGE, the activities of breeding, rearing, and fattening of beef cattle are carried out in about 172 million hectares in Brazil, mainly in the Southeastern and Mid-western regions, where 106.7 million head of cattle are concentrated, that is, about 53.9% of the total herd. The Southern region has 26.2 million (13.2% of the total) and the Northeastern region has 26.8 million (13.5% of the total). In the Northern/Amazon region, there are approximately 38.5 million head (19.4%





of the total), distributed among more than 500,000 farms either large, medium or small, strongly concentrated in the South of the states of Pará and Rondônia. Therefore, in order to implement a reliable environmental traceability system in this region, the chaotic agrarian structure must be first settled, and that will take some years and will only occur if a real political decision is made and financial resources are made available for this purpose.

There are two extremely poor productivity indices of the industry in Brazil that must improve in the coming years: the support rate of head per hectare, with a national average of only 1.15 head per hectare, due to the predominance of extensive farming in low-quality natural grazing; and the offtake rate, the number of slaughters over the total herd, around 22% in Brazil, that is to say about 44 million head slaughtered per year from a herd of 198 million head. Both are poor performance indicators in the industry when compared to other countries, and if they are not improved, they may compromise the Brazilian beef industry's capacity for sustainable growth in the future.

Experts agree that if there is appropriate public and private investment in the near future leading to genetic improvement of the herd, improving pastures, also including intensive or semi-intensive fattening systems, improving animal health services and livestock traceability systems, and improving the efficiency in logistics, in a decade's time we could increase the support rate to up to 1.5 head per hectare and the offtake rate to approximately 30%. This means that by 2020, we could slaughter about 75 million head per year, with a 250 million-head herd in Brazil, that is, almost double its current production of beef and leather, without adding a single hectare of land or destroying a single hectare of forest in the country, and, quite the contrary, making available degraded grazing areas in the Amazon region for the expansion of agriculture or even for environmental recovery.

In order to face these immense challenges, there is a need for joint action in all links in the production chain, from the farmer to the retailer, also entailing genetic improvement and animal health, with the effective participation of civil society through associations such as CNA, ABIEC, ABCZ, CNPC, among others, as well as public institutions at federal, state and local level. We will only be able to build effective and long-lasting solutions through a rational and responsible dialogue that in the future will confirm Brazil's standing as an environmental power, and also as the largest producer and exporter of foodstuffs in the world. We welcome positive criticism that will help us achieve this difficult mission.



*Associação Brasileira das Indústrias
Exportadoras de Carnes*

Association of Brazilian Beef Exporters

*Av Brigadeiro Faria Lima 1912 14º J
01451 000 São Paulo SP Brasil*

*Tel. 55 11 3531 7888
Fax 55 11 3032 5997*

*www.abiec.com.br
www.brazilianbeef.org.br*