

Where's the BEEF?

Alumna's innovative business verifies food sources to meet industry and consumer demands

by Coleman CORNELIUS

Like many entrepreneurs, Leann Saunders and her husband spotted opportunity amid crisis.

It was December 2003, and the first case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, commonly known as "mad cow disease," was identified in the United States in a Holstein cow that had been slaughtered in Washington. Reaction from export markets was swift: Doors once open to U.S. beef slammed shut. Major importing countries, including Japan, South Korea and Mexico, quickly banned U.S. beef and cattle.

Federal agencies launched beef recalls, genetic testing, herd inventories and quarantines. Authorities worked furiously to prevent any potentially tainted meat from entering the food supply, where, if consumed by people, it might trigger a fatal human variant called Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

Investigators used sales records and genetic in-

formation to track the index cow to her birth herd in Alberta, Canada – where she likely had eaten feed containing a pathogenic protein from meat and bone meal – and tried to locate her offspring and herd mates, animals also at risk for developing BSE.

As effects reverberated through the beef industry, investigators identified 81 cattle connected to the index cow that they wanted to find and euthanize to avert any potential risk of more BSE. Of these, 29 cows were found in Washington, Oregon and Idaho. But 52 cattle were not definitively located, according to a U.S. Department of Agriculture case summary. That pointed to clear problems with traceability.

Leann and John Saunders observed the case from their home near Kansas City, Mo. They realized the livestock industry urgently needed to

close information gaps to improve food safety and security – and to maintain critical markets and consumer trust.

"We have to be able to transfer information up and down the supply chain," Leann Saunders said, recalling the BSE event while speaking at the 2013 Governor's Forum on Colorado Agriculture in Denver in February. "We need the ability to trace back to sources more quickly to mitigate risk in the event of a disease outbreak."

The couple was well-positioned to contribute solutions; their mantra became traceability.

Leann had seen the supply chain in action while working as a purchasing specialist for McDonald's Corp. She also had worked for PM Beef, a leading



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Leann Saunders

- Grew up on a cattle ranch near Durango, Colo.
- Graduated magna cum laude from Colorado State University in 1992 with a bachelor's degree in agricultural business
- Earned a master's degree in beef industry leadership from CSU in 1994
- President of Where Food Comes From® based in Castle Rock, Colo.
- Original company, IMI Global, is now a division of Where Food Comes From® Inc.
- Company employs about 40 people
- Vice chair of the U.S. Meat Export Federation board of directors
- Leads U.S. Meat Export Federation's Traceability Working Group
- Frequent guest speaker for classes in CSU Department of Animal Sciences



Where's your beef coming from?

Scan a QR code next to a Where Food Comes From® label, and learn about the rancher who raised the beef

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supplier of Midwestern, corn-fed beef that was a front runner in developing USDA Process Verified systems for producers in response to demands from progressive retailers.

John Saunders, who had earned two degrees from Yale University, was an expert in technology and the livestock industry. He had founded a company called IMI Global in 1995 to provide database technologies that could effectively collect and convey verification information for cattle producers and suppliers.

Their big business opportunity emerged shortly after the U.S. BSE case of 2003: The USDA set industry-wide verification standards to more effectively trace cattle from their originating sources through the beef supply chain. IMI Global had the knowledge and services in place to help beef producers and processors comply.

“We started helping the industry meet those USDA standards. We provided a third-party auditing service that allowed the markets to get back in there,” said Leann Saunders, who became IMI Global president. Saunders, who now lives with her family in Castle Rock, Colo., was invited to discuss her company as a case example of innovation during the recent Governor’s Forum on Colorado Agriculture.

It’s a point of pride for Saunders that in 2012, the value of U.S. beef shipped to Japan eclipsed the value shipped before the market quake of 2003. “These verification systems allowed us to get back into that high-value market,” she said.

But IMI Global didn’t stop pushing forward once the company found its niche in traceability information services for the beef industry. The company began looking more closely at the consumer side of the food equation, realizing that consumers increasingly want to know what exactly is in their food, who’s raising it, and how.

Rather than discounting consumers and their concerns as misinformed, Saunders and her team saw another opportunity: the chance to expand their verification systems to capture farm-animal welfare standards, production processes – and



Where Food Comes From® verifies beef sources and production practices, and through QR codes, provides information about the people who raised it.

even the personal stories of producers.

“It’s this whole concept of connecting food producers with consumers. It’s all about verification, education and community,” she said.

In 2011, the team launched Where Food Comes From®, a new labeling program signifying the

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availability of consumer-driven information. The Saunderses even changed the name of their company to Where Food Comes From®, Inc., and made IMI Global a unique division.

“Where Food Comes From began with the consumer in mind. It’s all about taking what we do and translating it for the person who’s shopping at the grocery store. What she really wants to have is a connection to the family behind her food,”

Saunders said. “As an industry, we have to humanize our food. Consumers don’t always understand the industry, but they want to know more about their food.”

The Where Food Comes From® labeling program got a lift from new technology that allows people to scan QR codes with cellphones and other mobile devices to access information embedded in the codes. QR codes, which are specialized barcodes, increasingly are used on labels and in publications to provide consumers with more information.

The labeling program is now in its infancy – adopted by the legendary Delmonico’s steakhouse in Manhattan, and the high-end Heinen’s Fine Food stores based in Cleveland, Ohio.

Saunders hopes to attract other nationwide retailers and to incorporate social media and web-based video programming into Where Food Comes From® information services.

“We want Where Food Comes From to create value all the way through the supply chain,” she said. “In our company, we believe that you have to be a change agent, and you have to create value.”

Dick Monfort Livestock LEADER

Third generation to be honored

Dick Monfort, scion of one of the West’s most prominent cattle families, was recently honored by Colorado State University’s Department of Animal Sciences as 2012 Livestock Leader for his role as a champion of the nationwide beef industry and for high-impact philanthropy that benefits agriculture.

Monfort is owner/chairman and chief executive officer of the Colorado Rockies Major League Baseball franchise, and is entering his 16th season with the club. Before that, he worked for 25 years in the cattle industry and headed his family’s renowned beef business, Monfort of Colorado, Inc., based in Greeley, a company that helped cement Colorado’s leading role in U.S. beef-cattle feeding and meatpacking.

The Livestock Leader Award was presented during a reception at the National Western Stock Show in Denver in January.

“We are extremely proud to honor Dick Monfort,” said Kevin Pond, head of the Department of Animal Sciences. “He is the third member of the Monfort family to be selected for the honor, and represents the third generation of a family known for innovations that have shaped beef-cattle feeding and meatpacking in this country and internationally. Portraits of his grandfather and dad have graced our Livestock Leader wall for a number of years.”

For 26 years, the Department of Animal Sciences has recognized a Colorado leader of the livestock



Dick Monfort, center, accepts the 2012 Livestock Leader recognition from CSU President Tony Frank, left, and Kevin Pond, head of the Department of Animal Sciences. Monfort’s portrait will hang along with those of other honorees, including his grandfather and father.

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— Kevin Pond, head of CSU’s Department of Animal Sciences

industry for contributions that have advanced state agriculture, its business practices, knowledge and reputation. The department conferred a similar honor, known as Stockman of the Year Award, for many years before that.

Warren Monfort, Dick Monfort’s grandfather and founder of Monfort, Inc., was honored in 1968; Ken Monfort, Dick Monfort’s father, whose work expanded the family’s feeding and packing company into an empire, was honored in 1987.

Dick Monfort took the reins as president of Monfort of Colorado and ConAgra Red Meats Co. for eight years. He became president of Mon-

fort of Colorado, Inc., in 1987 and joined ConAgra Red Meats in 1991 as the president and CEO. He retired from ConAgra in 1995. Operations founded by the Monfort family are now owned by JBS, a multinational food-processing company.

Yet the Monfort family’s influence on agriculture continues. For instance, the CSU Department of Animal Sciences is home to the Monfort Chair in Meat Sciences, within the Center for Meat Safety and Quality.

Likewise, the family’s contributions to CSU have established the Monfort Scholars, Monfort Professors, Monfort Professors-in-

Residence and the Monfort Lecture Series. These programs help CSU attract and retain outstanding students and faculty; host highly recognized global leaders; and host leaders in business and government. These contributions are among many statewide.

For his significant contributions to CSU, its students, faculty and staff, Dick Monfort received an honorary doctoral degree from President Tony Frank in May 2012.

“Dick Monfort’s foresight has enriched all of agriculture and our state in many ways, and we are pleased to honor him for leadership in the livestock industry,” Pond said.