

ND Cattle Groups Clash over Beef Checkoff

BLAKE NICHOLSON, Associated Press



In this Dec. 4, 2013 file photo Alton Zenker gathers netting from round bales while feeding cows on his ranch near Carson, N.D. The North Dakota Stockmen's Association plans to ask the 2015 Legislature to double the \$1-per-head checkoff that ranchers pay when they sell cattle. The national beef checkoff, which is used to fund beef research, education and promotion, hasn't changed for nearly three decades, prompting seven states to increase it at the state level in recent years. (AP Photo/Kevin Cederstrom, File)

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A ranchers' group is opposing the North Dakota Stockmen's Association's efforts to double the \$1-per-head checkoff that ranchers pay when they sell cattle, saying increases should be agreed nationwide.

The Stockmen's Association plans to ask the Legislature next year to increase the checkoff to \$2 per head to provide more money for beef research, education and promotion. Ranchers would have the option of asking for a refund of the additional dollar.

Independent Beef Association of North Dakota President Kenny Graner said checkoff increases should not be decided by lawmakers in a single state. IBAND was formed eight years ago by ranchers unhappy with the Stockman's Association.

"They (Stockmen's) want to do it through the legislative process — now you have people who are not paying into the program deciding whether we are going to pay in more or not," the Morton County rancher said. "It becomes a political game. You eliminate the producer point of view."

Stockmen's President Jason Zahn, who ranches near Towner, said there is strong support for an increase in the checkoff that hasn't changed for three decades.

"Costs have increased and inflation has caused the buying power of the dollar to shrink to less than half of its value at the time of its inception," he said. "Attacks on

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beef and beef production practices are increasing, and the needs of our industry to educate consumers and promote our product continue to grow."

Congress authorized the national beef checkoff program at the \$1-per-head level in 1985. The North Dakota Beef Commission is required to forward half of the money collected from ranchers in the state to a national beef board. The other half can be used in-state or for national efforts, and the amount spent in-state each year varies.

The Stockmen's Association is proposing that half of a \$2 checkoff would go to the national board and the other half would stay with the state Beef Commission. Ranchers could ask for the second dollar to be refunded — meaning those who don't want to take part don't have to, Zahn said.

Graner said that would present headaches for ranchers.

"When you're forced to opt in and then have to go through channels to get (the money) back, that's not a true voluntary program," he said.

Under the Stockmen's proposal, any increase on the state level would go away if the checkoff is increased nationally. In the absence of a national consensus to push a fee hike through Congress, seven states have increased checkoffs at the state level, according to the Stockmen's. But two others have defeated such proposals, according to IBAND.

Graner said his group believes too much of the checkoff money goes to the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, a group IBAND does not align itself with because of policy disagreements.

"NCBA's relationship with the beef checkoff has polarized industry support for the program, jeopardizing its future," Graner said.

Zahn said the NCBA is only one of numerous organizations that administer programs funded by checkoff dollars.

"These dollars are maintained separately from NCBA's policy division, and a robust series of firewalls assure the integrity of the system," he said.

Both IBAND — which has about 270 members — and the Stockmen's — which has been around for 85 years and represents about 3,000 ranchers — plan to lobby state lawmakers during the 2015 session.

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