



The Next Decisions Shaping Meat Production

The meat industry is planning for a future in which cattle availability, global demand, regulation and technology may change at different speeds. Presentations across the 2026 Reciprocal Meat Conference showed why no single forecast or innovation can resolve all of these pressures. The useful question is how producers, processors, researchers and product developers can make better decisions with the animals, markets and tools available to them.

Plan for a Changing Cattle Supply

Strong demand for beef does not erase the challenges created by a small cattle herd. Fewer available animals leave packing plants competing for throughput while the fixed costs of operating those plants remain. Whether and how quickly the herd expands depends on cow-calf economics, the cost of replacement females and decisions made across many individual operations. An industry outlook therefore has to consider processing capacity alongside cattle numbers, rather than assuming one will adjust neatly to the other.

Longer-term planning also involves the people who raise cattle. As ownership changes hands and producers weigh the investment required to retain females, herd rebuilding may not follow the timing of a conventional cattle-cycle forecast. At the same time, demand for beef quality and protein remains a strength. The opportunity is to protect that value while preparing for a period in which supply and capacity may be poorly matched.

Trade Makes More of the Animal Valuable

Exports are more than an outlet for excess meat. Different markets value different cuts and variety meats, helping the industry find buyers for portions of the animal that have less demand at home. Nearly a third of U.S. pork production is exported when variety meats are included, according to figures presented at RMC. Mexico is especially important to pork, while Asian markets remain important destinations for beef and for particular pork products.

That value depends on access as well as demand. Tariffs, plant registrations and other market requirements can change which products move and what they return. Diverting a product when a major market becomes unavailable does not guarantee another buyer at the same volume or price. The practical lesson is to develop multiple markets and understand the specific products each one needs, while recognizing that some destinations cannot quickly replace others. Domestic and export decisions are connected parts of carcass value.

Policy Changes Have Operational Consequences

Policy can change the operating conditions of a plant as well as the market for its products. Differences among state and federal requirements, inspection costs and labeling rules may influence where meat can be sold and how a processor plans staffing, production and documentation. These effects can be especially consequential for smaller businesses. Bringing operational evidence into regulatory discussions helps decision makers understand how a proposed change would work across the industry.

Public perception and retailer expectations can also shift ahead of regulation, influencing market positioning and how businesses communicate with customers. Considering those signals alongside compliance costs and economic pressures helps companies plan across functions rather than respond to each change in isolation.

Evaluate Biotechnology by the Problem It Solves

Biotechnology in food animals includes can be utilized in many ways. Gene editing could be used to pursue traits such as disease resistance, while cultured animal cells may become an ingredient used alongside conventional meat. Each application raises distinct questions about safety, production scale, cost, oversight and consumer understanding. Its value cannot be judged from the technology label alone.

One example raised at RMC was the regulatory difference between selecting naturally hornless cattle through breeding and producing a comparable trait through gene editing. It illustrates the need to examine both the characteristics of an animal or food and the process used to develop it. A promising laboratory result must still reach commercial scale, meet applicable requirements and solve a problem customers or producers actually have. Research partnerships and communication across animal science, food science and regulation will determine which ideas can move into use.

Find More Value in Existing Streams

With protein supply tight, fuller utilization deserves attention alongside production growth. One established separation process recovers lean beef from fatty trimmings and produces edible tallow. The presenter estimated that wider use of similar processes could recover substantially more beef for human food; that estimate is a potential, not current output. Other concepts discussed, including using additional poultry streams or beef lungs in food, remain in development and would require appropriate food-safety controls and viable markets.

Packing and rendering already direct other portions of an animal into food, pet food, feed, hides and technical uses. Their return depends on the condition of the material, the ability to segregate and process it, and what buyers need. A stream with limited value in one market may support a higher-value use elsewhere. Reducing loss is thus a business and research question as well as a sustainability one: preserve quality, establish safety, identify demand and share the value created across the supply chain.

Consider Packaging and Food Loss Together

Packaging belongs in the broader sustainability discussion because its environmental footprint cannot be separated from the food it protects. A lighter or more recyclable package may use fewer materials, but a weak seal or insufficient barrier can shorten shelf life and increase product loss. Assessing both material use and food preserved under actual distribution and storage conditions gives a stronger basis for deciding whether a packaging change improves the overall outcome.

Conference Presentations Featured in This Article

This article synthesizes presentations and discussions from across the 2026 Reciprocal Meat Conference, including contributions from Don Close on cattle supply and processing capacity; Jessica Spreitzer on red meat trade; Chris Young on legal and regulatory issues; Tom Payne, Larry Quint and Jesse Collins on policy and consumer expectations; Eric Schulze on biotechnology in food animals; Nick Roth, Trevor Caviness and Chavis Ferguson on fuller utilization and rendering; and Prem Singh on packaging, shelf life and sustainability.

About RMC Exchange

RMC Exchange extends the value of the Reciprocal Meat Conference by synthesizing research and discussions from multiple presentations into topic-focused articles. Each feature connects the science, highlights emerging trends, and explores the practical applications advancing meat science and the meat industry.