

Ms Constance Cullman, who is the CEO and President of the American Feed Industry Association (AFIA), taking up her position in October 2019, started her career working in academia supporting farmers, helping them with livestock forecasts and understanding how markets might look for the year ahead. She's an ag-economist by training, and this often informs the approach she takes towards industry issues.

Following this, she worked directly for a farming organisation in the late 1990s, at a time when the industry first started talking about sustainability issues; an interesting time for issues that were challenging farmers on trade and the environment.

After this experience, Ms Cullman moved to the US government's Foreign Agricultural Service to work alongside the country's major trading partners before joining the corn refining industry where she carried out advocacy work for a major agri-business in the area of technology - pesticides and biotechnology - as its head of a government affairs program.

Milling and Grain caught up with Ms Cullman on the AFIA booth at the recent IPPE 2020 in Atlanta, Georgia, USA held in late January 2020.

You've recently taken over the mantle of president and CEO of the American Feed Industry Association (AFIA); what were some of your first impressions of the feed industry?

My first impression of the animal food industry is that it's a dynamic industry, where innovation is playing a key role in turning animal nutrition and feed into a solution for some of the challenges we're facing in today's world. The animal food industry sits at the hub of things when it comes to food-producing animals and pets because we purchase many of our ingredients, such as corn and soy, from farmers and eventually sell our products back to farmers and ranchers. We're very much a part of that system, which is an exciting place to be, especially when you look at the innovation that's taking place.

What brought you to your current position in the feed industry?

I joke that my background has been all over the place. I started out in academia working with farmers, developing livestock forecasts to help them understand what the markets might look like for the next year. I'm an agricultural economist by training, so that often informs the approach I take with the industry. After that, I started working directly for a farmer organisation. This was in the late nineties, a time when the industry first started talking about sustainability. That was an interesting time to be working directly for farmers and the issues that were challenging them on trade, sustainability and the environment. I next worked for the U.S. government at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service, and I worked closely with our trading partners. With the change in administration, I went to work in the corn refining industry for a brief time. I ended up advocating for a major agri-business in the area of technology (pesticides and biotechnology) as the head of a U.S. government affairs program. I took a break from advocacy when I went to work at the Farm Foundation for three years, which was a tremendous opportunity to take a step back and look at things from a neutral position and inform policy discussions. I learned that I loved advocating for the industry and playing a part in how decisions evolve that affect the sector, which is one of the reasons why I was so excited to join AFIA.

How does your current role play out internationally?

You can't talk about the domestic industry without putting it into the context of what's happening globally. A lot of my graduate training was in international trade, so I've spent a lot of time focusing on how our domestic sector fits into the

global picture. Looking forward, it is one of the key priority areas I'm looking at with AFIA. We have recently added new trade expertise to our staff so it's a wonderful match with my interests. I currently serve on the board of the International Feed Industry Federation (IFIF) and the board of the Global Feed LCA Institute, which is taking a look at metrics for measuring LCAs for the feed ingredients used in livestock and poultry rations on a regional and global basis. We have a robust agenda for trade at AFIA.

Is the current trade war between the USA and China affecting feed production?

It has definitely affected the industry. We source a lot of ingredients from China, and China is an important export market for many AFIA members. The biggest problem we have faced is the unpredictability the trade tensions have brought to business planning as companies look at how they are going to position themselves. We couldn't have been happier with the outcome of the phase one trade agreement as it addressed many of our concerns. The first being the registration of facilities to be able to export to China, which has been delayed for nearly a decade for some facilities. We now have a predictable process where Chinese authorities will be working with U.S. authorities on registering facilities that have already met the high standards the Chinese authorities have been looking for. The second major priority was removing the ban on ruminant ingredients. We are also very excited to see the ban on poultry ingredients lifted. Negotiations were difficult, but implementation will also be challenging. We will remain engaged with U.S. authorities to make sure they put into place a plan that's workable so we can interact with the Chinese authorities.

How do concerns about antibiotics, GMOs, animal welfare and food safety remain important issues, and how are these concerns being impacted by environmental concerns?

In many ways, they are all directly related. The use of antibiotics is critical to animal welfare, while at the same time, we are introducing more rigorous stewardship protocols governing the responsible use of antibiotics. Animal welfare, GMOs and the use of antibiotics are all directly related to our sustainability model for all of agriculture. When we talk about the environment, we can't just talk about one issue in isolation as they are all related. Our approach is to keep all these concerns in the forefront, but to keep them in context.

I'm excited about the conversation on the environment as I

think the feed industry is part of the solution. One of the things that we want to do is help people understand that there are consequences to all diet options. For example, if everyone in the U.S. went vegan, it would only reduce global greenhouse emissions by 2.5 percent. Is that worth the loss of nutritive value in people's diets? Moreover, it does not take into consideration all of the other parts of animals that are used in other sectors of the economy. People rush to find a silver bullet solution without really understanding the consequences.

How do we get that message out to the general public?

We need to begin to talk about what we do and what our systems look like. I'm not trying to defend the industry; I'm trying to explain what's happening and what our value propositions are. There are a lot of experts out there and the more we can highlight rigorous science that demonstrates these things, the better off we'll be. We also have to be transparent about how we do business and how what we're doing reflects the public's values. We need to let people know what we're doing and then prove it. My long-term vision is to increase our engagement with the international community: how we work and trade with different parts of the world, how we meet the nutritive needs of different parts of the world and to make sure the trading rules and standards under which we operate are supportive of innovation and good science.

A large portion of the world population is not being well served by animal agriculture and the feed industry is at the heart of that. Do you see developed countries helping more when it comes to how we provide food to the developing world?

I believe it's important that the developing world has access to some of the same technologies that we have proven work well and effectively, and those technologies are size neutral. That is the beauty of the feed industry—it is very much a size-neutral technology. As a member of IFIF, we do a lot of capacity building and outreach and we're very supportive of those initiatives. We want developing countries to recognise that there are a lot of benefits to their citizens through reaching out and establishing freedom to operate for their entrepreneurs in the animal food sector. The more we produce with less, the lower environmental impact we have. It's not a small problem and we cannot solve it overnight. But we are offering a different vision of where we are.

Any final thoughts?

I'm an incredible optimist. I think we face a lot of challenges, but I'm very optimistic that we can face those challenges; whether it's for the industry, for society, the environment and see a strong connection between all three.



The market place

VIDEO: Interview with Constance Cullman, President and CEO American Feed Industry Association

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