

ANIMAL WELFARE - ANIMAL RIGHTS: ROLE OF GRAZING

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The care and handling of farm animals has drawn a lot of media attention lately. Some well-publicized events have given our industry the proverbial black-eye and led to a chain of events that has left livestock producers feeling very vulnerable to negative attacks. Although these events have been very isolated, they have had some very far-reaching effects. Could they have been prevented? How? What do we do now?

The first BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) case in the United States occurred in December, 2003 when a non-ambulatory “downer” cow was slaughtered in Washington State. The cow originated in Canada and no meat from the cow entered the food supply but the damage was done and cattle prices plunged costing the industry millions of dollars. This cow should have never have gone to market.

Animal abuse by workers at the Hallmark Meat Packing Company in Chino, California was captured on tape in 2007. Another downer cow, which posed no health risk, was abused by unskilled, uncaring workers. For a brief period of time, they represented the entire beef industry and not in a good way.

What did we change as a result? We eliminated a “loophole” in the law that was allowing some “downer” cows to be harvested. But...the damage was done. We opened the door and organizations like the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) came on in and accelerated their attacks on the animal industry. Which do these groups care about animal welfare or animal rights? Does it make a difference? Of course it does.

What happened after the Chino, California event? California is a ballot initiative state and consumer groups with a sense of timing put Proposition 2 on the ballot in the November, 2008 election. Proposition 2 – which outlawed some battery cages for laying hens, gestation crates for sows and crates for veal calves – passed 63% to 37%. That vote pointed out several things to our industry:

- (1) Farmers and ranchers are a distinct minority.
- (2) Public perception impacts our income.
- (3) Groups that are opposed to animal agriculture are well-funded and well-organized.

- (4) There are some areas of animal production that cause a lot of public concern:
- Battery cages for laying hens
 - Crates for veal calves
 - Farrowing crates for sows

The vast majority of livestock producers are very concerned about animal welfare. We have to be since we have the most at stake. A few bad events can cause an enormous amount of trouble for the entire industry. We have to convince everyone that handles cattle in any way (working, hauling, harvesting, etc.) that acceptable standards must be met. If we don't, others who may know very little about our industry, will make regulations for us.

Animal Welfare or Animal Rights?

Is the real issue animal welfare or is this really about animal rights? Animal welfare is a prime concern for all of us but animal rights is an entirely different matter. We can work with groups that want assurances that animals will be well cared for and treated appropriately. We may even have to eliminate some practices that are unacceptable to the meat-consuming public and we should adequately train all of the people that are responsible for the care and handling of livestock. Finally, we may need to regulate ourselves before someone else does it for us.

What about granting equal rights to animals? Is that next? Are we cleaning up our industry or opening the door to folks that believe that animals have similar rights as humans? Animal welfare leaves us room to negotiate but animal rights could put us out of business.

Some groups say that they want us to treat animals humanely, but is it really humane care or humanization of animals that they are interested in? This difference is huge and probably not reconcilable between the two extremes (the livestock industry and the activists). Activists hope that more people will become vegans but that is unlikely to happen unless our industry fails to respond to societal demands. Most people don't really care if the President of the United States swats a fly but our society does want the animals that they consume to have led lives under conditions of good husbandry. Rollin (2004) said in a keynote speech of the American Society of Animal Science "society wishes to see pain, distress and suffering minimized and natural behavior needs respected." Our industry must act or be regulated by the general public. We cannot ignore the desires of those that buy our product.

What about Grazing Livestock?

Grazing pasture is as natural as it gets for ruminants like cattle. Ruminants utilize forages, which may be of little value to humans, to produce meat and milk. We have a lot of land that can support grazing animals. We should, in my opinion, graze cattle for as long as possible in the production cycle. Most cattle do spend some time in

feedlots prior to being harvested. We should let folks know that cattle spend more of their lives grazing than in feedlots. Consumers don't have a great problem with the concept of producing cattle on grass but we do have to protect the overall market. The "ban" on horse slaughter in 2007 also left us to ponder what would happen if market opportunities for farm animals were lost.

The reality is that we will continue to be under pressure to produce more food on less land. The FAO predicts that world food production will need to increase by 70 percent by 2050 to feed an additional 2.3 billion people. Cattle will need to utilize more forages and by-products while competing less for feed grains. However, concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) will likely remain a necessity to feed the world population.

What do we need to do?

- Cull cattle in a timely manner. Market them while they are still healthy and observe all withdrawal times for animal health products. Euthanize animals that aren't marketable, are in severe pain or have incurable conditions.
- Be sure cattle handlers are properly trained. Programs like Master Cattlemen emphasize the importance of low stress handling.
- Handle animals as if you are being videotaped because with our new technology (like cell phones), you could be. Don't permit any abusive behavior in your operation.
- Don't use livestock haulers, sale barns, etc. that permit abusive behavior. They are still your cattle until they are sold!
- Breed animals for docility so that they can be handled easily with less stress.
- Keep your cattle in good body condition, well-immunized and well fed.
- Support organizations that protect our interests and get a positive message out to the consuming public. Consider a new image for cattle producers.
- Should we regulate ourselves before regulations are imposed upon us?
- Consider that there may be some practices that just aren't accepted by society.
- Don't "demonize" animal rights groups. Focus less attention on them and more effort on getting a positive message to consumers.