

Seizing a 'Golden Opportunity'

Bernie Rollin encourages cow-calf producers to seize the opportunity to educate, but to also work to eliminate public eyebrow-raising practices regarding animal welfare.

Story & photo by **Kim Holt**

Cow-calf producers know that right is right and wrong is wrong when it comes to the welfare and husbandry of animals. This resonates well with the American public, Bernie Rollin relayed as he addressed 400 attendees, including 100-plus college students, at the sixth annual Cattleman's Workshop in LaGrande, Ore.

Rollin is a Colorado State University (CSU) distinguished professor with appointments in the departments of philosophy, animal science and biomedical science. He has established a good rapport with the ranching community, in the past 30 years addressing 16,000 of its members from northern Alberta to the Mexican border.

Originally from Brooklyn, N.Y., Rollin has lectured and consulted around the globe. He's authored 15 books, including *Farm Animal Welfare* (1995) and *The Well-Being of Farm Animals: Challenges and Solutions* (2004, with John Benson).

Rollin's audiences include medical researchers, attorneys, psychologists, philosophers, veterinarians, animal advocates, government officials, students and lay people, along with farmers and ranchers.

"I know agriculture, and I really do like cow-calf people," he says. "You're the best people I deal with." But, he says, "The biggest problem you guys have is you don't know how to fight the people you need to fight."

Since 1980 Rollin has taught a course on ethical issues in animal agriculture for animal science students at CSU. In this class, students — many of them ranch kids — learn how to go toe-to-toe with industry opponents. Rollin encourages his students to "learn to utilize the same tactics as those being used against you. They use philosophy; there's no reason you can't use philosophy. They use ethics; there's no reason you can't use ethics," he says.

"I've developed a good reputation for being the guy who most explains the rancher ethic to the urban public," Rollin told attendees. "There's an irony that the most humane, sustainable, environmentally conscious, ethical-driven branch of agriculture gets the worst rap."

He encourages the beef industry to deal with issues surrounding animal welfare.

"You need to manage this issue," he says, calling it both a threat to the industry and a "golden opportunity." There are some beef production practices, he says, that need to be replaced with more humane alternatives.



► "The biggest problem you guys have is you don't know how to fight the people you need to fight," says CSU's Bernie Rollin.

Changing social ethics

Rollin explains it's the general public that is driving the animal welfare ethic, not People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) or vegans. This issue isn't lessening because the consumer who buys and prepares beef wants reassurance that the product is safe and healthy and that the animal has been humanely raised and processed.

"It's very important to keep your finger on the pulse of social ethics," he says. "One of these areas that society has begun to pay attention to in the last 40 years is animal treatment."

For example, in 1996, the American Quarter Horse Association's single, biggest expense was tracking bills pertaining to horse welfare on the local, state and federal levels. In 2004, Rollin shared, there were 2,100 bills proposed in the 50 states pertaining to animal welfare.

"Animal welfare goes beyond politics," he says. "All you have to do is watch the news. People just don't tolerate it."

Society was content with anti-cruelty laws until 1970. But a lot has changed during the



last 40 years, and, with it, people's view on how animals should be treated. Rollin explains there are a number of reasons for this social change.

One reason lies with how far removed people are from agriculture. Those who are involved in production agriculture have a very different relationship with land and animals than people whose orientation to land and animals has evolved around maybe a quarter acre of lawn, a garden and a family pet.

In this case, "The pet animal becomes the emblem for all animals," Rollin explains. In fact, veterinary school surveys show the minimum percentage of people who see their pets as family members is 87 and the maximum is 99.

This social ethic has also been spurred by the media, which has discovered that "animals sell papers," and ethical changes from women's liberation to feminism to even Gandhi.

"These ethical movements give each other momentum. And, of course, you can't deny that the celebrities have become involved," Rollin says. "I would say that the celebrities who push veganism are much more dangerous than PETA."

While the aforementioned have all had effects, Rollin says the major factor that has led to this ethical revolution in society has been the change in animal use.

"We have raised animals, at best I can tell, for 11,000 years, and there was a very clear secret to being a successful raiser of animals, and it was called animal husbandry," he says. Husbandry meant putting an animal into its ideal environment, then investing in its ability to survive and thrive for self-interest, so you didn't need animal ethics.

In the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, however, this started to change. The belief was that traditional agriculture would not suffice for a growing population. The predictions of population increase, growth-rate explosion and cities that gobbled up farmland all came true. People didn't want to be on the farm anymore for reasons that included the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression and World War I, which had taken people to more sophisticated places.

"We had to get more efficient. And that meant applying industrial models to the

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production of animals," Rollin explains. In doing so, however, he says animal welfare, not productivity, has suffered.

Industrial ag vs. husbandry ag

Rollin points out that there is a difference between industry and husbandry. He says if you're a rancher who has spent more money or time on an animal than it was worth, that explains the difference. Caring for animals — animal husbandry — is a way of life.

"This is what the public wants," he says. "I'm going to argue that caring for your animal's welfare is the lifeblood of what you do. I'm convinced that you guys really are environmentalists because if you're not, you don't have something to leave to your kids. It's not some abstract ethic for you; it's your legacy."

He adds, "Contrary to what other people may say, this is not one agriculture. You are radically distinct from the rest. Do you not try to give your animals a decent life? You have a marketing advantage of humaneness. There's absolutely nothing wrong with using that."

Since last August, Rollin has been speaking to more beef-cattle audiences, in part because of Proposition 2, which passed in California in November 2008. Prop 2, as it's known, requires that egg-laying hens, veal calves and pregnant sows have room enough to lie down, stand, turn around and fully extend their limbs, effective 2015.

"These people are all very nervous about the animal welfare thrust in society. For you guys this is not a threat, it's an opportunity. You do exactly what the public wants out of animal production. The public doesn't want

industrial ag, the public wants husbandry ag. That's what you do," he said.

"Do you seriously think the public wants to be vegetarian?" Rollin asks. "Of course not. Do they not want animal products? Of course not.

"But everything has a price," he says. "My own opinion of the price is this: You need to give up those practices that raise general public eyebrows." Specifically, he says, these practices include hot-iron branding, castration without anesthesia and dehorning without anesthesia.

Rollin has worked with animal scientists and ranchers on alternatives to castration and branding. Immunocastration as an alternative to knife castration has been one project; another is retinal identification, Optibrand, which Rollin helped bring to the marketplace as a hot-branding alternative.

Another alternative to knife castration is feeding intact males, advocated by University of Nevada-Reno research. Or, as in Britain, for example, calves can be castrated without anesthesia until eight weeks of age. With the use of behavior scores, CSU's Temple Grandin concluded producers are better off using a local anesthetic when hot-iron branding or, instead, freeze-branding.

"It's so easy for you to dispel the negativity," Rollin says. "You don't have to do it overnight. But make a step in that direction.

"You have to speak for you. And that's what we try to teach the kids. You have a great story, and it's not a story — that's the point. You just talk from the heart and you have the general public — if you eliminate the embarrassing things," he says.

"I'm not telling you what you want to hear; I'm telling you what you need to hear," he adds. 

Don't fight, deal with it

Bernie Rollin believes states need to get involved in animal welfare. "Don't fight it, but deal with it," he advises. "Rest assured that you have to do it. Wayne Pacelle [Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) president and CEO] is committed to the abolition of agriculture. He says it openly; he's said it in farm interviews. However, he's also smart enough to realize that isn't going to happen."

But he is fixed on abolishing what he terms "outrageous" farm practices. Rollin points out that California's Proposition 2 didn't touch the beef industry. But several years earlier, Rollin had helped broker a joint piece of legislation between HSUS and the Colorado Livestock Association (CLA) satisfactory to both sides. After this, Pacelle withdrew the Prop 2 referendum he wanted to place in front of Colorado voters. Advisors had told CLA they'd need \$12 million to fight this referendum.

Rollin told Cattleman's Workshop attendees, "If they (HSUS) come to you, I'll be happy to try to help broker a deal when you feel you're backed to the wall."

Animal care legislation has recently passed or is in the works in several states, with the latest being Ohio, Indiana, Missouri and Idaho. The Idaho bill sets up a Livestock Care Standards Board, similar to the one voted in last November in Ohio.

To keep up to date on the latest animal-care legislation, activist groups and related issues that threaten producer livelihoods, visit www.humanewatch.org and also www.farmerfreedom.org, sponsored by the Missouri Beef Industry Council.