

A Sleeping Giant

The Animal Rights Movement hasn't gone away or lost its strength. Steve Kopperud of the Animal Industry Foundation says it's time to accept this fact and to counter impending attacks with factual and positive messages — straight from the livestock producer's mouth.

by Janet E. Mayer

If you haven't heard much about animal activists lately, you might be like many livestock producers and assume that the animal rights movement was just a temporary craze.

"Well, think again," says Steve Kopperud, president of the Animal Industry Foundation, Arlington, Va. "Trust me, they have not gone away. Just because you aren't reading much about these organizations in the headlines doesn't mean they aren't still around; they are here and thriving. Not only are the groups inundating our schools and supplying our children with propaganda on a daily basis, they keep alive the negative issues that threaten the livestock and poultry industries."

In a public survey conducted by the Animal Industry Foundation in 1994, results showed that most people emotionally support farming and ranching. However, when they encounter the reality that there are incredibly large operations out there owned by corporations which challenge that romanticized notion of the small farm with animals that are not confined, the public starts to get nervous.

"They don't want the science behind it or the day-to-day operation, they just want to know the producer is a good person, doing good things, and producing a high quality, safe, food product," he says.

Kopperud believes there's nobody better equipped to educate the public than the livestock producer. "It's not going to be lawyers and lobbyists who save this issue; it's going to have to be producers. Make an



Steve Kopperud, president of the Animal Industry Foundation, Arlington, VA., recently spoke at a special session on animal use and welfare at the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau annual meeting in Hershey, Pa. Kopperud has been involved with livestock agriculture interest groups for 15 years.

effort to make the public aware that you're doing a good job and document those efforts," he says.

Blaring headlines such as: "Mad Cow Disease in Britain," "E-coli Outbreak at a Fast Food Restaurant in Northwest," "Red Meat and Dairy Products Blamed for Contributing to Heart Disease," and "Poultry Products Tainted With Salmonella" are all fuel for the fires of the animal rightists and activist groups.

For the tens of thousands of U.S. consumers who may already have concerns, the media's coverage of these problems only serves to make them more apprehensive about the food they eat and about the industries that produce it.

"I believe the public has the unequivocal right to know about the quality of the food they consume and feed to their families," Kopperud says. "But if the public hasn't already drawn enough conclusions by themselves after the media exploitation of some of these problems, the animal rightists and activist groups often compound the confusion by keeping the issues alive."

In his role as spokesman for the Animal Industry Foundation, Kopperud tries to identify and address public concerns about modern livestock and poultry production and welfare.

"We try to provide factual information for consumers as a means of countering the animal rights and activist misinformation," he says. "It's relatively easy to make consumers believe what they read because most people are not knowledgeable of scientific facts. Much of the public harbors a romanticized idea of farming and ranching, and they support food producers to a point. The point when that trust is lost, however, is when people become sick or die. It's then perceived that not just a few producers are at fault, but all producers are doing it wrong."

On the other side of the coin, Kopperud says many livestock producers share the mind-set that if their product can be sold, that is all that counts. Some producers feel all that is needed is Robert Mitchum advertising "Beef, It's What's for Dinner," the dairy industry's "Celebrity Milk Mustache" ads, the pork producers' "The Other White Meat" campaign, or the poultry advertisements featuring "Purdue chicken," and the public will ignore the criticism.

"This is an incorrect assumption," Kopperud says. "The public does not ignore bad publicity about the livestock industry. Many in the industry keep trading on the notion that because the American public has always eaten meat and drunk milk, they will continue to do so."

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The Animal Industry Foundation thinks it's very important to let the public know who produces their food, how it's produced and what the quality is. "As consumers become more sophisticated, the demand for more detailed information about the quality of their food will increase, and the livestock industry should be ready to meet that need," Kopperud says.

The animal rights groups launch campaigns aimed at school-aged children, which Kopperud says are successful. He recalls one promotion featuring Crisp-Pea Carrot, a person in a carrot suit, standing outside an elementary school telling children, "Friends don't eat friends."

"This approach is effective because it plants the idea in children's minds that they should eat vegetables instead of meat," he explains. "After all, meat comes from their friends, which the rightists are quick to point out are much like those featured in 'Babe,' a movie about cute, talking animals."

High school youths are another prime target of the organizations. This is often accomplished with the assistance of their teachers. It may be as simple as sending a large packet of vegetarian information to a high school teacher, who passes it on to her students.

Kopperud says vegetarianism has become a way of life for many teenage girls, including, reportedly, Chelsea Clinton. In interviewing teenage girls between the ages of 14 and 17 about their dietary habits, reports show two out of three will say they are vegetarians not necessarily because they want to stay thin, but because they have picked up a piece of literature that says it's chic to support animal rights.

A large number of teenage publications preach that animal rights is a trendy issue, and teachers receiving materials from the National Humane Education Association compound the issue by supplying schools with incredibly attractive literature for the teenagers.

"It's easy to make alleged abuse a very attractive issue," Kopperud says. "It's not easy to make pork, beef or dairy production attractive. Teachers say, 'You know the stuff from your Animal Industry Foundation is nice, but it just isn't quite as pretty as the animal rights stuff.' It's a mind-set for the next generation of consumers for this country."

USDA received more than 8,000 letters from animal activists last year. These letters questioned the lack of legislation to regulate animal welfare on the farm. Many ag commodity groups have provided USDA with samples of program materials that address animal welfare such as handling and care guidelines, quality assurance programs and other efforts to even further enhance animal well-being at the farm and processing levels.

-Animal Industry Foundation

Although the number of adult vegetarians in our country now is under 3 percent, a point of fact is that of the 66 percent of teenage girls who are vegetarians, 70 percent will modify their diets; however, 5 percent will stay strict vegetarians.

"I feel vegetarianism should be a way of life for the masses only if it's a necessity, meaning if the livestock producers no longer exist," Kopperud says. "Although the livestock industry knows it should be doing something, it's not addressing the issue. Producers must realize that 80 percent of the American public accepts animal rights as a mainstream issue, and, strangely enough, after 15 years, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has decided there is political hay to be made in the issue. Unfortunately, it's not political hay that will be gained to benefit us."

Although USDA has the jurisdiction to oversee biomedical research, Kopperud says, there is no federal law that governs the care, handling and welfare of farm animals. During the past year there have been meetings among a number of groups with interests in animal rights and the Assistant Secretary of Agriculture who is in charge of animal welfare programs. In Kopperud's opinion this may be an effort to put into effect an animal welfare program similar to one in Canada.

Managed by the Canadian government, the program involves representatives from Canadian agriculture, the Royal Canadian Humane Societies and the livestock

production communities. Together they came up with a standard set of practices acceptable to govern the industry.

"That in itself is not bad," Kopperud says. "Most organizations in our country, with the exception of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, have developed standards independently. However, something that concerns me greatly is the USDA deciding what constitutes a standard practice for pork, beef, poultry or whatever, because they haven't a clue or the expertise as how to start the process."

"They simply assume, based on what they have been told by animal rights groups, that we need guidelines. I feel they will try to set them up to avoid bad publicity. I think the USDA has decided animal welfare is a political issue and, by addressing it, they can make some major points with the public."

Kopperud urges those involved in the livestock industry to address animal welfare through recognition, education and research, as well as better understanding of moral philosophies.

"Think of the future and what this is going to do to your operation in the next 10 to 15 years," he says. "What will be the legacy for your children and grandchildren? Something must be done now. We must be serious about the animal welfare issue; it's not one that can be cast off as unimportant."