



ANGIE STUMP DENTON PHOTO

# The Right Thing

*Unethical and illegal activities in livestock shows negatively affect the industry and the exhibitors. Public outcry against questionable showing practices has led to a national initiative addressing the need for ethical decisions by livestock exhibitors.*

BY BRAD PARKER

If the eyes are the windows to the soul, into whose eyes should someone seeking the soul of animal agriculture look? For many in our increasingly urban society, fairs and expositions have become the only window. What they see in the eyes of livestock exhibitors becomes their view of the industry.

Considering this, is it any wonder why some in the general public think of animal agriculture as cruel and untrustworthy? When they open their newspapers to read about lambs being beaten and pigs drowning while being force-fed gallons of water, will they think our industry is concerned with the welfare of our animals? When television reports disclose the illegal use of steroids in show steers sold for slaughter, will they consider our food supply to be safe?

These incidents are unusual, but rarely will a livestock exhibitor make the news for doing everything correctly. About four years ago, there were so many negative reports

concerning livestock shows that some people may have wondered if anyone was still doing the right things. That insurgence of bad publicity led to addressing a subject that for too long had been considered taboo.



## Call for action

"We knew this stuff went on, but it was just unspeakable; you couldn't talk about it," says Jeff Goodwin, an Extension 4-H and youth specialist at the University of Idaho. He explains that the seeming explosion of livestock-show scandals did have a silver lining. "It allowed us to start talking about it and get it out in the open," he says.

"It finally reached that peak, and information was just overflowing about all these events taking place," says Blake Aldridge, staff spokesman for the National Livestock Ethics Council (NLEC), a nonprofit subsidiary of the Livestock Conservation Institute (LCI).

During its more than 80 years of existence, LCI had developed a system of issues-based committees, one of them being the Livestock Care and Handling Committee. That group requested a symposium on livestock ethics.

Approximately 200 people attended the first National Youth Livestock Program Ethics Symposium in Las Vegas in 1995, and a second meeting followed the next year in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Although a national plan of action addressing livestock ethics was defined in Nevada, it wasn't until the Texas symposium that the idea was

developed to form an organization that would give full-time attention to the issue. There, NLEC was born and placed under the auspices of LCI.

"LCI's unique in that it's an organization of organizations, and in being such, it is able to represent a large cross section of the animal-agriculture industry through the breadth of its membership," Aldridge says. "That's how LCI came to the forefront and was placed in the position of being asked to facilitate the symposium and, down the road, to establish the standing body to address the issue."

Now, just more than two years after being given that charge, NLEC has a Web site ([www.lcionline.org/nlec](http://www.lcionline.org/nlec)), a national newsletter and a resource kit available for those interested in the issue. With guidance from the livestock producers; high-school agriculture instructors; Extension personnel; show, rodeo and fair managers; university educators and allied industry representatives on its board of directors and Livestock Show Ethics Advisory Committee, the council promotes educational initiatives, industry standards and quality assurance measures related to animal agriculture.

According to Goodwin, who serves on both NLEC's board of directors and its advisory committee, the fledgling organization is working hard to get information to those who need it. "We've accomplished a great deal by getting this vast warehouse of knowledge and subject matter and resources pulled together so people can access them and use them," he says. "The challenge right now is to get all that information out to folks."



## Campaign trail

Aldridge says that, until now, NLEC has been working to "get its feet on the ground," but it's taking its first steps into a new informational campaign entitled *Just Do the Right Thing*.

To prepare for the upcoming national launch of the campaign, the council distributed cowboy-boot-shaped appliques bearing the theme at the 1998 National FFA Convention in Kansas City, Mo., in November. Each was accompanied by an information card explaining what it means to do the right thing. The appliques and cards also were given to participants of the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) Partnership Exposition in New Orleans in December.

"Everyone was very receptive to the materials," Aldridge says. "People were coming back to get more of them to take home to others. At the FFA convention, we noted that the youth were going and getting

their advisors, bringing their advisors back, and saying, "This is where I got this."

He says it's encouraging and impressive that young people were eager to take the message home with them so everyone could become informed and get involved. "That was really good to see. It let us know that we are on the right track and that the information is wanted and that it is needed," he adds.

Goodwin's not surprised at the initial success of the campaign.

"Ninety-nine percent of young people are hungry to do the right thing, and they want some help to figure out what the right thing is," he says.

The campaign will be a three-year project, Aldridge explains. By the end of that period, NLEC hopes to have 30% of fairs, 50% of county Extension programs and 50% of FFA chapters using the campaign's educational materials or subscribing to its newsletter and informational services.



### What's right?

As defined on the cards distributed in the campaign, the "right thing" includes three points: to avoid wrongdoing when competing in livestock exhibitions; not to be pressured into participating in unethical practices; and never to compromise the welfare of the animal.

Goodwin says almost any ethics question could be answered by adhering to those guidelines. "We try to keep it simple," he says, adding he posed his own questions in a video he produced on the subject in 1996 while a county Extension agent in Texas.

His video, *Line in the Sand*, is being distributed by Texas A&M University and asks exhibitors to consider four questions: Does the practice violate U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) law? Does it compromise the welfare of the animal? Is it a fraudulent misrepresentation of the animal? Does the practice have anything to do with real-world agriculture? If the answer to any of the first three questions is yes, or the last one is no, Goodwin suggests the practice is unacceptable.

One showing official offers similar thoughts for exhibitors. Matt Claeys, who has judged several livestock exhibitions, including the junior Angus show at the '98 North American International Livestock



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Exhibition (NAILE) in Louisville, Ky., says he also has four key questions: Does this practice affect the safety of the food supply? Does it alter the composition of the animal or give the exhibitor an unfair advantage in competition? Does it affect the person's integrity as a breeder or exhibitor? Is the practice within the rules of the activity?

"I think if you ask yourself those questions, you should be able to do the right thing," the Purdue University livestock judging coach and Extension beef cattle specialist says.

"Everyone has their own set of ethics, and everyone defines *right* and *wrong* in their own way, so you do have some differences," Aldridge admits. "We're just wanting to help disseminate the current information and current programs. The whole idea of all of this is to remove these incidents from the showing and the industry."

Trying to define ethics sometimes leads to more questions, says James Fisher, director of youth activities for the American Angus Association. "Some people consider using professional fitters in junior shows unethical, but others consider it part of the program," he explains, adding the exhibitor's conscience is often the best guide. "If there's a question about whether it's ethical, you're probably safer not to do it," he advises.

Fisher agrees the issue deserves more attention, and he says the Association encourages its members to do the right thing through its show rules. The Association also has committed to advancing the issue by becoming an NLEC subscriber, sharing information with other breed associations and working with the International Association of Fairs and Expositions (IAFE).



### Problem defined

According to Goodwin, there are two kinds of ethics issues: the manipulation of animals and matters of character. With many livestock shows geared toward finding the visually perfect animal, some exhibitors have been tempted to alter their animals' compositions. Sometimes that leads to using methods — like illegal drug use — that have the potential to affect the food supply.

Things like falsified ownership and birthdates and proper showing etiquette are other issues, Goodwin and Claeys say. "Those are more people questions than they are food or quality assurance questions," Goodwin explains, adding many states seem to focus on educating exhibitors about observing product labels and withdrawal times. "That's important, but those quality assurance education efforts don't touch some of the ethics issues like lying," he says.

To address that situation, NLEC has developed a two-pronged approach. On the quality assurance side, the council reminds producers to always use proper handling and care techniques, provide proper nutrition and facilities, read and follow product labels, and use proper injection sites. On the show side, exhibitors are encouraged to ask themselves the four questions from Goodwin's video plus ask if the public would agree with a practice. "I think both of those efforts have to be addressed," Goodwin says of NLEC's approach.

He guesses, based on the data he's collected, that only 5% of exhibitors are engaged in unethical practices, but that leads to what he sees as the flip side of the issue and why the problems won't just disappear.

"There's a big bunch of that vast majority [who aren't employing questionable practices] who would rather look the other way than ensure that things get done right," Goodwin says. "You've got to stand up and do what's right, or there's no telling where we'll end up, and it's a tough thing to do sometimes. I was always of the opinion that if I chose to look the other way, I became part of the problem."

Goodwin adds that he's never gone looking for unethical activities, but they've always revealed themselves. "We all need to mind our own business; but when something slaps you upside the head, it does become your business," he explains.

Claeys says there has to be some self-regulation and peer pressure involved. He doesn't believe it's the judge's job to police the situation. He doesn't seek out violations, nor does he react to speculation and rumors. "We need to deal with fact," he explains. "The role of the judge is to place the cattle for what they honestly are; and if

you suspect something, then you put them in the appropriate place.”



### Emphasis on youth

Although open shows provide the same opportunities and incentives for unethical practices, educational initiatives are usually focused on youth exhibitors.

“We think we can make more progress by working with the youth shows and the young people,” Goodwin explains. “I think it’s not only the opportunity but the obligation that we have with youth shows to teach kids to do the right thing.

“Here’s an opportunity for us to teach kids about making good, ethical decisions — not just in the showring but in everyday life — and I think teaching ethics in everyday life is a much bigger subject than teaching how to show. I think it’s a much more important subject,” he adds. He believes good decision-making goes right along with other life skills, like responsibility and recordkeeping, taught in youth livestock programs.

Claeys also believes the child-development standpoint has made ethics more of an issue in junior shows. “The animal is the tool with which we develop the kids,” he says, and each family and club needs to ride herd on the issue to make sure children are being taught properly. “We have to remember that 99% of the kids out there are doing the right thing — they’re learning through their project,” he adds.



### End results


Each of the sources contacted for this article sees addressing the ethics issue as a way of preventing harm to the livestock industry.

“Every time someone cheats or an incident occurs at a fair or exposition, it not only affects the outcome of that event, it affects the youth involved; it affects the adults there; it gives a black eye to that particular event; and it gives a black eye to the entire animal-agriculture industry,” Aldridge says.

Goodwin believes those black eyes could lead to the end of a long-standing tradition. “I really fear that if we just continue to go on as we have, in so many years we won’t have a youth livestock show,” he says.

Citing the fact that, of food animals in the United States, nearly 1% is marketed through a youth livestock show, Goodwin warns of the effects of more bad publicity. “That’s a large enough number for the

public to pull the plug on this thing because of food safety concerns, and that’s a small enough number of animals for commercial agriculture to write us off. There’s the danger right there,” he says. “We don’t have to be here. Unless we clean up our act and worry more about the lessons we teach our kids, that activity might not be around in the future.”

Claeys also encourages a long-term look at the issue. “There is a right way and a wrong way of doing things, and we need to keep in mind that we need to do the best job we can with the project so that we can supply high-quality seedstock to the commercial producers and, ultimately, a safe, wholesome product to the consumer.” 

## National code of ethics provides direction

To assist livestock exhibitors in identifying some of the issues associated with making ethical choices, the International Association of Fairs and Expositions (IAFE) set out to develop a National Code of Showring Ethics. Through many hours of thoughtful deliberation, a full legal text was developed, which has since been adopted by a large number of fairs and livestock expositions.

To make the code easier to understand for junior exhibitors, the Livestock Show Ethics Advisory Committee, a group of advisors to the National Livestock Ethics Council (NLEC) board of directors, condensed it to 11 short points of consideration.

“The purpose behind the condensed version was to take the material that was currently available and that many fairs and expositions use and to pare it down to something that a young person would understand,” says Blake Aldridge, staff spokesman for NLEC. “All we wanted to do when we developed the 11-point code was to condense it to where anyone could understand it and review it quickly.”

The condensed version, which has not been officially endorsed by IAFE, is a starting point for understanding your responsibilities as a livestock exhibitor:

All exhibitors in any event at a livestock show will at all times conduct themselves with honor, honesty and good sportsmanship. Those who violate the code of ethics will forfeit their premiums, awards and auction proceeds and be prohibited from future exhibition.

1. When requested by show officials, be able to show proof of ownership, length of ownership and age of all animals entered.
2. When requested by show officials, provide animal health certificates from a licensed veterinarian.
3. Junior exhibitors will care for and groom their own animals while at the fair or show.
4. Animals that will enter the food chain must be free of drug residues or foreign substances. For all animals, drugs may only be used in accordance with applicable federal, state and provincial laws. Any treatments at the show involving medications for the health of the animal must be administered by a licensed veterinarian. Show management or regulatory officials may take any samples they wish for testing.
5. Changing the animal’s performance, natural contour, conformation or appearance through surgery, injection or application of substances, such as irritants or counterirritants, is prohibited.
6. Showing and handling practices or devices to cause swelling are prohibited.
7. Direct criticism or interference with the judge, show management, other exhibitors or breed-association representatives is prohibited at all times. Problems will be resolved through appropriate channels.
8. No one may conspire, contribute to or cooperate with others to violate this code, either by their action or inaction.
9. Owners, exhibitors, fitters, trainers and participants are absolutely responsible for an animal’s condition whether or not they did something in violation themselves or knew of treatment that violates the code.
10. Exhibitors, upon entry, consent to disciplinary action for violation of the code of showring ethics, including publishing the infraction and violators’ names.
11. Exhibitors verify that they have read and understand the code of ethics, as well as the consequences and penalties for violations. Exhibitors understand that evidence of violation of any law will be released to appropriate law-enforcement authorities.