

Countering the ~~MYTH~~

Beef producers fight back with the truth

BY STEVE CUBBAGE



CHRIS ANDERSON PHOTO

"The sobering fact of this social movement is that as cattlemen you cannot hide out on the range and continue to ignore the accusations these groups continue to direct toward the livestock industry. They will not go away. And if you ignore them they will erode the market share of your product and they will force animal welfare and environmental legislation down your throat," says Temple Grandin, livestock professor at Colorado State University. "The best thing you can do is clean up your house and tell consumers the truth."

"Space aliens found alive in abandoned New Mexico Air Force hangar."

"Elvis spotted eating peanut butter and banana sandwich at a New Jersey shopping mall."

"GREENHOUSE EFFECT TRACED TO FOUR-LEGGED BOVINE CREATURES CALLED COWS."

In this age of tabloid journalism and 30-second news bites, the American public is finding it harder and harder to get a good grasp on reality. This state of confusion, this aura of uncertainty has created an environment which is fueling an all out propaganda war against the beef industry and animal agriculture in general.

"The animal rights, and more specifically, the anti-beef campaigns are intensifying. One has to look no farther than the Beyond Beef campaign currently being waged by activist Jeremy Rifkin to see evidence of the escalation," says Janice Swanson, coordinator of Kansas State University's International Meat and Livestock Program. "In fact, what we are now beginning to see is the cumulation of several of these separate movements coming together as one and reaching critical mass."

Swanson says beef producers still have a tough time understanding why so many members of the American public can be swayed to believe in the myths of production agriculture fostered by animal rights and environmental groups. She points out, however, that producers are actually an entirely different creature than a majority of the American population.

"Today, 98 percent of the people in this country have no direct experience with raising production livestock," notes Swanson. "Factory farming has become a mainstream term and the concept that animals should receive consideration equal to that given to humans in regard to pain and suffering appeals to the intellectual elite. Moreover, the animal rights movement is gaining support by being tied to other social issues, including sexism, racism and environmental concerns."

The reality of the current situation facing the beef industry and others in production animal agriculture is that no matter how hard you rub that oil lamp or

click your pair of ruby slippers, the animal rights and environmental issues are not going to go away.

Swanson, and other industry officials agree that it will be necessary for cattle people and the rest of the industry to fire back in this all out battle for the minds and the stomachs of Americans. The common ground the industry has found to fight this war is centered around truth and knowledge and the tool of education.

The National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) is one producer organization that is investing a lot of stock in educating consumers, and also producers, about the truths of modern-day production agriculture.

In early 1990, NPPC's newly formed animal welfare task force composed primarily of pork producers, began distributing to fellow producers a guidebook on production practices called, "Swine Care Handbook for Producers Involved in Environmentally Controlled Housing."

"Hog confinement buildings which house large numbers of hogs were one of the first targets of animal rightists," says Charles Harness, director of information for NPPC. "That's because animal rightists have been trying to sell the myth to the public that hogs are routinely raised on 'factory farms' where they are mistreated and confined in crowded, unventilated pens and sheds. This is simply not true.

"We believe the best defense the pork industry can have against the animal rightists who are lobbying for our extinction is to make sure our producers practice modern, sound animal husbandry based on science not emotional rhetoric," says Harness. "It is important that as an industry we have our house in order, because the animal rights movement has put our industry under the microscope."

To coordinate and evaluate the production material going to pork producers, NPPC hired veterinarian Beth Lautner to

head the organization's newly formed producer education program. This program will work on producing "how-to" publications and videos on new production practices, and also informational series on major issues such as animal rights.

At the 1992 World Pork Expo held in June, NPPC made available to producers an updated version of its swine production handbook which Lautner helped develop.

"Whereas the first publication focused primarily on producers with confinement facilities, this publication encompasses all types of producers," says Harness. "This publication covers familiar areas such as modern herd health practices, breeding practices, nutrition, and animal comfort and welfare. But it also addresses new issues such as dealing with 'downer' animals."

The issue of downed and crippled animals flashed to the forefront last year when Becky Sanstead, an animal welfare activist, videotaped 'downed' animals at the South St. Paul Livestock Market in South St. Paul, Minn. The incident received front-page media attention and NBC television even broadcast a prime-time documentary as a result of the incident.

"The 'downer' issue very quickly showed those involved in animal agriculture that we still have a few things to learn and all is not well. Those who have the misconception that everyone in this industry wears white hats is probably wearing rose-colored glasses," says Temple Grandin, a livestock professor at Colorado State University. "The industry needs to take a hard look at itself and remove the warts, such as 'downers,' which make it vulnerable to the animal rights movements."

"It's easy for the industry to defend itself when some animal rights group says that cattle are destroying the ozone or

some radical vegetarian dressed in a pig costume pitches a pie in the face of the Iowa Pork Queen," says Grandin. "However, there are things that happen in a significant minority of ranches, feedlots and packing houses which are indefensible. There is no way to defend rough and cruel handling of animals and if the livestock industry is going to have any credibility left with consumers, it had better dot all its i's and cross all its t's."

Hoping to bridge the chasm that has developed between producers and consumers, many agricultural organizations are now directly responding to the questions that the animal rights and environmental movements continue to place in the public's mind.

For example, the Federation of American Societies of Food Animal Sciences (FASFAs) recently established industry response teams to provide scientifically

based information to people with questions or concerns about animal agriculture.

Michael Dikeman of Kansas State University's department of animal sciences and industry, and response team coordinator, says "The federation is making scientists across the nation available in live areas of food animal science and animal behavior to answer questions of public concern."

The founding member societies of FASFAs include the American Society of Animal Sciences, the American Dairy Science Association, the American Meat Science Association and the Poultry Science Association. The five areas which the response team focuses on are: animal well-being, biotechnology, diet and health, food safety, sustainable agriculture and the environment. KSU's Swan son is a member of the team's animal well-being division.

Many of these same livestock industry groups have formed a Food Facts Coalition which respond to the media and the public with factual information whenever a 'hot' topic such as the current Beyond Beef campaign makes a big splash in the public forum.

And remember the big uproar the industry had when the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals ran the full page advertisement in the *Des Moines Register* likening the consumption of red meat to the cannibalistic killings by mass-murderer Jeffrey Dahmer? Now, the Beef Promotion and Research Board is running full page advertisements in newspapers such as *USA Today* and the *New York Times* showing consumers that cows are really "Mother Nature's Recycling Machine." The advertisement above appropriately ran on Earth Day, April 22.

"This is the pro-active stance at work in a positive way," says Joe Linot, Kansas Beef Council. "The public needs to see more of the positive things animal agriculture is doing for them. Always responding to the negative animal rights and environmental charges only ends up placing a negative light on the industry."

The Beef Board is also taking a pro-active step into the nation's classrooms where consumers attitudes are being formed in the minds of America's children.

A national beef education campaign focusing on fourth-grade children is a priority for the industry group.

"Information packets filled with fun worksheets and games show kids how beef is produced, the safety of our food supply and how cattlemen take good care of the environment," says Linot. "Another thing we send is a growth chart showing


how the many essential nutrients in beef can help kids grow up to be healthy adults. Kansas City Royal's star George Brett growth charts have been a big hit with school-age children."

The most influential ages for kids are usually from 6 to 10 and also during the early teenage years. "It's difficult to gauge the attitudes of children. As tomorrow's consumers, kids are being heavily targeted by various segments of the animal rights movement, so it only makes sense for beef producers to also get their time in the classroom," Swanson says.

The livestock industry has made some definite changes because of calls for the more humane treatment of animals such as less stressful and safer handling facilities. Grandin, for example, designed an animal restraint system for packing houses which made processing much more humane. Many manufacturers of sow farrowing equipment are designing improved facilities

which allow a sow more room, yet prevent her from crushing any of her newborn piglets.

"This is the positive side of the animal welfare movement," says Grandin. "And these advancements only add to a producer's bottom line, because the less stressed an animal is, the better that animal will perform. The best reason of all to provide a humane, low-stress environment is economic."

The last spin the livestock industry is putting on the animal rights and environmental issues is a political one. The state and national cattlemen's and cattlemo-ven's associations are urging producers to write their U.S. Congressmen and encourage them to join the Congressional Animal Welfare Caucus that Representative Vin Weber (R-Minn.) has organized. The caucus includes members of Congress who promote the humane treatment of animals yet recognized that animals provide much-needed products for humans. 

MOTHER NATURE'S RECYCLING MACHINE




 Cows help solve landfill problems. Twenty-five percent of food processing by-products is fed to cattle. Skips, lamb pulps, peels, stems, almond hulls, fruit pits, cottonseed, and grape skins have juice and some preservatives all help produce hamburger, roast beef, steaks, and more.

 Cows make the most of our food production resources. Eighty-five percent of what cattle eat is material that people can't digest. In fact, half of the plant material resulting from food-crop production, such as corn stalks and wheat straw, need to go to waste if cattle didn't eat it.

 Cows are natural recyclers. Their remarkable stomachs allow them to digest grass, hay, silage, food by-products, and other materials that people can't eat.

 Cattle production is solar powered. The "solar collector" is the surface of an acre of land in the U.S. that can't be used for growing food crops. About two-thirds of all agricultural land in the U.S. is classified as grazing land. The cow provides the energy for this natural resource to grow the grass that cows eat.

 Cows are also environmental problem solvers. Like mowing a lawn or pruning a tree, rattle grazing promotes plant vigor and diversity. Experts say that soil productivity, as well as water and air quality, is better maintained by well-managed grazing than by almost any other type of land use.

U.S. Cattlemen
America's Original Conservationists

 Produced by the Beef Promotion and Research Board for the National Cattlemen's Association 