

The Bottom Line

Animal Rights vs. The Livestock Industry

by Janet Mayer

The 4-H member headed toward the show arena with high hopes. He had spent many months preparing for this moment. Last year, he had competed for the first time in the county fair's baby beef competition and had not done too well. This year he was ready,

He was more sure of his showing abilities this time, and he also knew he had an outstanding calf. Maybe he would even win grand champion, or at least reserve and be awarded a banner.

Suddenly somebody threw a firecracker at the feet of his animal, and the calf ran wildly into the arena with the boy frantically trying to control his calf. A person standing on the sidelines was snapping photographs.

Why would someone take pictures of this distressing scene? According to Ann Banville, an agricultural media specialist from Washington, D.C., this type of scene did actually occur last year.

The photographer belonged to an animal activists group, who intentionally spooked the calf. This was done in order to present photographs to the public as an example of how farm youth are trained in animal care. This is just one episode in the continuing war being waged against the livestock industry by animal rights groups.

In the 1988 December edition of *Angus Journal*, former editor Jim Cotton made some suggestions for 1989 New Year's resolutions to Angus breeders. He suggested spending some time at the library finding out what outsiders think about animal agriculture. If readers took his advice, they were probably amazed and shocked by how far this movement has progressed in the last several years.

According to a *Newsweek* report, there are now 7,000 animal protection groups in the United States, with combined memberships of 10 million and total annual budgets of \$50 million. These organizations are devoted to the cause of animal rights and are extremely well organized in directing members how to get their message across to the public.

Members are taught how to relate to the media, how to organize a public demonstration, and how to form a local group. The groups are becoming increasingly vocal and intimidating, and in some instances even violent.

One of the groups takes credit for burning a California livestock market earlier this year. The fire did approximately \$250,000 damage to the Dixon Livestock Auction Company in Dixon, Calif. According to the owner, James Schene, the fire destroyed half of the market, but there were no personal injuries to employees or the 750 head of livestock in the market at the time.



HUMANE FARMING ASSN. PHOTOS

The fact the animal rights groups are well-oiled machines was brought home to many Pennsylvania cattlemen at their 1989 association convention this past March. One part of the program was titled, "Facing up to Animal Rights/Welfare, Concerns of Producers and Society." It was presented by Dean Conklin, vice president, Veal Programs, with the National Livestock and Meat Board, Chicago. A film depicting how veal animals are raised was shown to the cattlemen. This film is currently being shown to elementary school students across the country.

The adage comes to mind: one picture is worth a thousand words. The scenes, showing how veal calves are raised and abused in the process, brought tears to

the eyes of many cattle people present.

The film begins by comparing small calves to human babies. From there you are shown a wonderful family farm with two small children lovingly caring for happy calves. The scene then changes to the deplorable conditions of what is classified as a "Factory Farm."

According to Banville, a speaker at the conference, it is hard to imagine how it must affect a small school-age child viewing this atrocity. The ploy is meant to get to the parents through the child, and to achieve this, they humanize animals to play on the emotions of children.

School-age children and their parents are not the only ones being told embellished information. Many national animal rights groups give information to their members that is not entirely truthful.

One example is titled "Realities 1988, facts excerpted from *Diet for a New America*," by John Robbins of Baskin-Robbins fame. In Robbins' book he makes the beef industry look like the big bad wolf. Here are a few excerpts, not taken in context, which might interest cattlemen:

... 1.3 million human beings could be fed by grain and soybeans eaten by U.S. livestock ... 56 percent of U.S. agricultural land is used to produce beef... enough water goes into the production of the average cow to float a destroyer... if water used by the meat industry was not subsidized by U.S. taxpayers, the cost of a common hamburger would be \$35 per pound.

... the Meat Board tells us: "Today's meats are low in fat" and shows us a serving of beef they claim has "only 300 calories." They don't tell us that the serving of beef they show is only 3 ounces, which is only half the size of an average serving of beef, and it has been surgically defatted with a scalpel. ... The Dairy Council tells us: "Milk is nature's most perfect food"; they don't tell us that milk is nature's most perfect food for a baby calf, who has four stomachs and will double its weight in 47 days, and is destined to weigh 300 pounds within a year.

... McDonald's tells us: "60 billion sold." They don't tell us: Hamburgers

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are ground-up cows that have had their throats slit by machetes or their brains bashed in by sledgehammers.

Steve Kopperud, of the Animal Industry Foundation, Washington, D.C., says, "You will continue to see them produce more and more information that says you are not only cruel to your animals but that what you produce is also harmful to consumers."

He adds, "You can also expect to see more animal welfare legislation on state and national levels. California has already seen several pieces of animal rights legislation. One house bill introduced in California sought to outline specific production practices that could be used in veal production. It included provisions for a \$3,000 fine for violators and mandatory USDA inspection of all operations. It was defeated, but the bill or one like it will be back."

The CBS TV program, "48 Hours" produced a show on animal rights. Congressman Charles Bennet of Florida saw that program and said that it "outlined the horrors of how these creatures are treated." He was referring to how veal animals are housed and cared for. The program was the force behind the veal calf protection bill Bennet and 20 other colleagues introduced on Capitol Hill. If the measure is passed, USDA inspectors would check the veal production facilities, and violators could be fined up to \$3,000 for each offense.

The National Cattlemen's Association is opposed to the bill. Spokesman Tom Cook says it would be an unwarranted intrusion that isn't needed.

In the November '88 Massachusetts election, animal rights activists maneuvered a much publicized animal rights referendum onto the ballot. The state was ideal for the purpose with its well funded animal rights groups and relatively small number of family farms.

According to Mabel Owens, Massachusetts animal health director, the activists used half truths and appealing baby animals. They waged an emotional campaign aimed at people without farm knowledge.

The farmers worked hard to defeat the referendum by opening their farms to the public and talking to various civic groups. Had it passed, it would have required cost prohibitive changes for livestock farmers. The voters soundly defeated the referendum.

"We bought some time for farmers across the country," Owens says, "but the animal rights movement is not going to

go away."

Citing the difference between animal welfare and animal rights people, she explains: "Animal welfare people believe that animals should be fed and kept comfortable." Animal rights people, on the other hand, believe animals have all the rights people do and then some.

Trying to reason with such people is like talking democracy with the late Ayatollah Khomeini," Owens says.

A panel of specialists at the 1989 National Cattlemen's Association annual meeting said they perceive the ultimate goal of all the animal rights groups is to remove meat, milk and eggs from all



American diets. Some cattlemen feel the vegetarian activists would probably like to see the abolition of the use of animals by humans.

In most instances, the livestock industry and the media refer to all animal rights people as belonging to one group, but as Owens previously pointed out, there are two distinctly different animal rights factions with quite different philosophies and goals.

One group, who emphatically states they are not out to change the world to vegetarianism, is the Humane Farming Association. This group proclaims they are dedicated to protecting human health and animal welfare. Heading up the California-based group is Executive Director Bradley Miller, who was born in Alaska and was formerly a farm worker.

"A state of alarm is often achieved by raising the dreaded specter of vegetarian-

ism," Miller says. "For the record, the Humane Farming Association is an independent organization founded in 1985. Many of our members raise farm animals, and the vast majority of us eat meat."

Miller agrees that there should be more communication among animal welfare activists, producers and veterinarians. But of the countless articles written about animal activists in various industry publications, he points out, how many of the writers have actually talked with the activists? How many have asked about activists' concerns rather than relying on the conveniently inaccurate characterizations put on by opponents? "Very few," he says.

Miller believes that extremism exists on both sides, but cooperation and harmony can, indeed, become a reality. He says this is the desire of his association.

This is the association who is responsible for the familiar advertising campaign which depicts the suffering of veal calves, caged chickens and confined hogs. These ads appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Time*. For many people, this is the only information they have on how these animals are raised.

According to Miller, these ads were prepared from photographs taken at actual farms and all are conditions that do actually exist.

To the animal rights activists, the veal industry is a symbol of all that is wrong with the agricultural industry in our country. They feel much of the treatment to veal calves is cruel, unethical and unhealthy. They are opposed to branding, dehorning and castrating by beef producers; farrowing crates, castration and crowding in swine operations; and the overcrowding, debeaking and inhumane treatment of poultry.

Dave Henderickson of the *Milwaukee Journal* wrote in an article on the veal issue: "Because a siege mentality has developed in the veal industry, it is almost impossible to make an independent assessment of the effectiveness of government inspection or the health of a broad cross-section of calves. Are they sickly and crippled, as the animal rights people claim? Or are they healthy and robust, as the veal industry claims?"

Unfortunately, the National Livestock and Meat Board could not find a single veal processing plant in Wisconsin or Illinois willing to let a visitor in. The processors say they fear extremists in the animal-rights movement, people who might sabotage their plants. Not even a promise of anonymity would get them to open their doors.

"You have to wonder why? Henderickson says.

The controversy is emotional for both sides, with the animal activists saying: "This country was built on animal cruelty. First it was the trappers, then the cattle barons, and now the "factory farms." People raised on farms have developed moral blind spots that allow them to justify animal abuse. The cruelties are so obvious to people who don't live there and so invisible to the people who do. City people have the advantage of more objectivity, and they have the freedom to say it is their personal ethical belief that this is wrong."

The meat producers say: "How can people brought up in the city have the knowledge to judge what is a natural environment for livestock? In all reality nobody cares about animal welfare more than the farmer because his animals are his livelihood. After all, animals are not human, and who is to say if they are happy or not. The animals are not pets, and they can't think like humans. They feel pain, cold and hunger, and good animal husbandry tries to eliminate all three.

The realization that the situation with the animal activists is not going to fade away of its own accord has prompted the cattle industry to initiate appropriate measures. In January 1989, the National Cattlemen's Association Animal Care Subcommittee convened the first meeting of an industry-wide strategic planning committee. Heading the committee is Iowa cattiewoman Connie Greig.

According to Greig, the group is hard at work on a report which will become an industry-wide plan of action. The group has the following mission statement: "To preserve and enhance the positive image of the cattle industry to the public by presenting producers as responsible caretakers of their animals and providing reliable information on care, production and handling practices."

The first objective is to conduct a survey to find out how the cattle industry is perceived by the public. The public has received a lot of prior advice and instruction from animal rightists.

The second objective is to find out how the issue is really perceived by the industry. A second survey will determine how all segments of the cattle industry fit into this picture. After this is completed, a sound, logical strategic plan can be developed.

"We're in the livestock business because we are good with animals, not because we are bad with animals," Greig says. "We don't want to talk to the animal rightists about the issue because their minds are already made up. But there

are an awful lot of nice people out there who we can talk to."

The general public is becoming further removed from the farm with each generation, and consumers usually display disinterest in any subject relating to agriculture. However, the animal rights movement is rapidly changing this.

Regardless of why or how, the public is



beginning to ask the people involved in animal agriculture a vital question: Is the food we eat safe and has the animal been raised humanely?

Can most beef producers, honestly answer YES to that question, or are they only sure about their own operation and not certain about others? The main concern in this war is not just about regulation and legislation, but how all of the negative perceptions about meat production will affect the consumer.

Can the beef industry assure the general public that the meat being produced is a healthy, nutritious, safe product?

In truth, the animal rights groups did not spring up because mankind was dealing correctly with animals. Like industries, the animal production industry has individuals who do abuse livestock, and everyone is in agreement that these operators should be dealt with severely. But the sad fact is, the public is judging everyone together. They think if one producer treats his animals inhumanely then all meat producers must treat their's the same. It is the old rotten apple in the barrel proverb.

According to Banville, the ultimate issue is public perception versus reality. It is essential that everyone in the industry

become an informed expert dedicated to promoting a good image of the beef industry to the media, food industries, community leaders, government officials, and above all, the consumer, because educating these people is very much everyone's duty.

Talk to any local club or group who is interested in the animal rights issue, tell them the true methods practiced by the majority of meat producers. Help schools to set up programs to educate the children correctly so they are aware of how their food is produced. Invite them to your farm. Education is the key. Tell your side of the story.

The bottom line to the whole situation is this: whoever presents the best message and educates the consumer to the real facts will win the controversy.

NCA Video Recommended

A nine-minute video, "Our Side of the Fence," was recently released by the National Cattlemen's Association. This video was funded by the beef checkoff, and according to Tom Cook, NCA industry affairs spokesman, "it shows how Massachusetts farmers launched a comprehensive public education campaign providing reliable information about animal production and handling practices."

Copies of the videotape are available free from the Communications Department of the NCA, P.O. Box 3469, Englewood, CO 80155; (303) 694-0305.

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