

Uncloaking the Mystery of Ag

Sharing our food-producing story with consumers several generations removed from the farm can build support for animal agriculture, while countering ongoing animal activism.

by Kim Holt

The more we can take the mystery out of our industry, the more the public is going to continue supporting agriculture.” This was one of the key messages delivered by Kay Johnson Smith to beef producers gathered this past winter at the annual convention of the Idaho Cattle Association.

Johnson Smith is the executive vice president and the chief spokesperson for the Animal Agricultural Alliance, animal agriculture’s leading national advocacy group based inside the Beltway in Arlington, Va.

A 17-year veteran of the Alliance, Johnson Smith shared with producers her insight on animal activist groups such as the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), covering details on what producers can expect from these extremists, and what animal agriculturists can and should do to protect their livelihoods and way of doing business.

Big budgets, big lies?

“How many of you would like to have a \$400 million budget just to eliminate something you really don’t like?” she questioned. “This is what our industry is up against. We are facing organizations that collectively have a combined budget of \$400 million.” Plus, animal agriculture is their No. 1 target, she adds.

When the animal rights movement started in the mid 1970s, Johnson Smith explains, its focus was on research animals. In the 1980s, however, this group realized that more animals are used in the animal agricultural industries for food and fiber than any other. That’s when their focus turned toward agriculture and eliminating animal-use industries.

Animal rights groups and anti-modern agricultural groups — those that don’t necessarily oppose the use of animals but promote locally grown foods, while opposing technology and farm expansion — aren’t all lumped together. Though Johnson Smith shares that many of them are collaborating in their advertising and marketing efforts to “create a much louder voice on their behalf.”

Activists attempt to use emotional images and scare tactics to discourage Americans from



► Kay Johnson Smith gives a radio interview.

eating meat, milk and eggs because they do not believe that we have that right. Some groups, like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), are especially well-known for their radical activities.

“They come up with some of the most outrageous campaigns that exist,” says Johnson Smith. While they often don’t get their advertisements placed, they still reap the benefits of publicity from newspapers reporting on their radicalism — all for free.

She points out, however, that the public knows where PETA stands. “As crazy and extreme as it may seem, it brings in \$17 to \$20 million in donations from people who want to save or help protect animals.”

HSUS, on the other hand, is more deceptive. What people don’t realize is HSUS has “exactly” the same goal as PETA, says Johnson Smith. “It just knows it has to be more mainstream,” so this group’s campaigns, tactics and dress code differ.

“HSUS loves PETA because it makes them appear very moderate and reasonable,” Johnson Smith says. Plus, having “humane society” in its name also helps, which leads people to believe that HSUS is the national organization for their local animal shelter, helping protect the welfare of animals.

In fact, many donors — as are quoted on www.humanewatch.org — have been led to believe that their monthly donation, spurred by the heart-wrenching eyes of the dogs and cats in HSUS

television ads, are supporting local animal shelters when, in fact, they are being pocketed by HSUS for the elimination of animal agriculture.

HSUS raises more than \$120 million of the \$400 million of animal activist organizations, and its assets are in the ballpark of \$200 million for campaigns against the industry.

Johnson Smith relays, “HSUS is, by far, the most powerful animal rights organization in the U.S.; it is the most active and also the most deceiving when it comes to public impression and understanding of what the group is.”

Less than half of 1% of the money HSUS collects goes to support local shelters. Of that amount, most is spent on shelters where HSUS is running its next ballot initiative campaign, Johnson Smith informs, because HSUS wants support and a local presence in that respective state.

Nearly all the money it raises is from advertising featuring cats and dogs. “They appeal to people through their pets,” she says, as pets are considered part of our home and family.

HSUS’s good works can be questionable at best, from staged horse rescues to millions raised after Hurricane Katrina but with little spent or accounted for on relief and rescue of the Gulf area’s storm-victimized pets.

Wayne Pacelle, HSUS president and CEO, recently released a book, *The Bond*, a best-seller on the *New York Times* list, which details his lifelong bond with pets. Fifteen years ago, however, in an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, he talked about how he did not have pets growing up, and that it would be fine in his world if pets didn’t exist, because man interferes with their lives.

“It’s amazing what he will sell to the public and the public buys,” Johnson Smith says. She describes Pacelle as a handsome, smooth talker and a very effective lobbyist when it comes to selling his agenda. Pacelle has stated that his goal is to create the National Rifle Association (NRA) of the animal rights groups.

The Alliance reports animal rights groups are strategically connected in many ways, especially through personnel and financial support (see Fig. 1, page 106). Furthermore,



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numerous key activists have worked, now work or have ties to HSUS.

Two of these include Paul Shapiro, HSUS senior director for farm animal protection, who was the co-founder of Compassion Over Killing, an extreme, radical group based in D.C. John “J.P.” Goodwin, HSUS director of animal cruelty policy, is a former spokesperson with Animal Liberation Front, which has been classified by the FBI as a domestic terrorist organization.

While HSUS is the biggest opponent to our industry, other animal rights groups that have notable impacts include Compassion Over Killing; Mercy For Animals; In Defense of Animals; Farm Animal Rights Movement; Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine; Animal Legal Defense Fund; and Fund for Animals. The Alliance profiles these key animal activist groups on its website.

What do activists say about the cattle industry?

Animal activist groups view the cattle industry as being better than the broiler or pork industries because animals are raised outside. Though they still take issue with what they consider:

- ▶ abuse, neglect and overcrowding;
- ▶ factory farms/CAFOs — they consider all CAFOs as factory farms;

- ▶ use of antibiotics, growth implants or other technology;
- ▶ “painful mutilation” — castrating, dehorning, branding, tail docking in dairy cattle;
- ▶ transportation of farm animals — a big issue not just in the United States, but also internationally (They would like to eliminate long-distance transportation of animals, says Johnson Smith.);
- ▶ environmental issues — animal rights groups are no longer just talking about animal welfare or animal care, but are also tag-teaming with environmental groups to lay blame on the industry for both environmental and public health impacts; and
- ▶ health and nutrition — their goal is to reduce animal protein intake, while promoting vegan diets.

The problem? They're not getting their way.

As Johnson Smith points out, we all have the power to choose what we do and eat each day. The bottom line is this, “The activists aren’t getting what they want because it’s not in line with American values or what the American population wants. So, therefore, they are seeking to change how you do business.”

These groups use numerous tactics to get their message out to create doubt about our food system and the people who produce it.

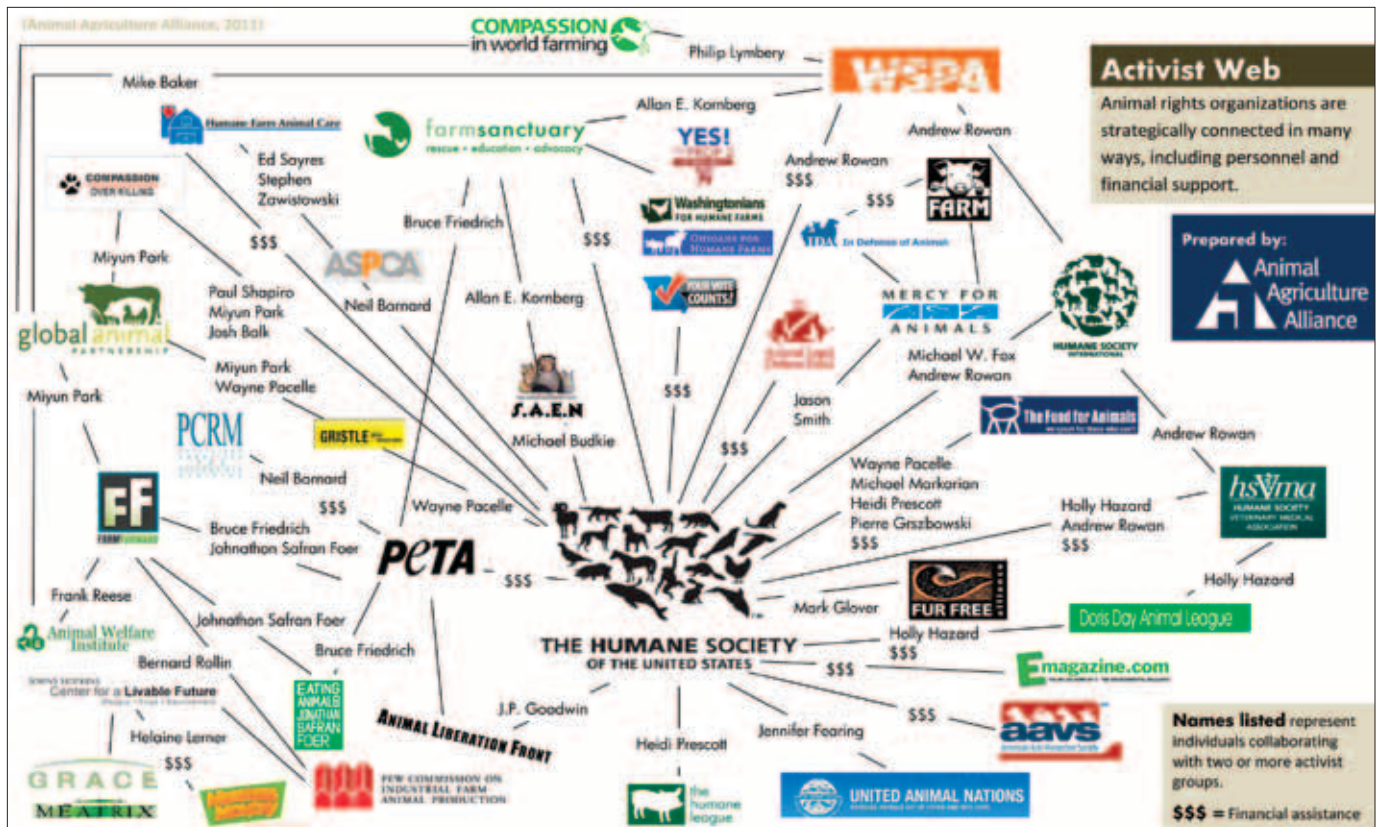
▶ **Undercover investigations** are one of their most successful tactics. Once a misleading video is posted on YouTube, Facebook or Twitter and goes viral, it reaches people worldwide. “It’s very powerful,” says Johnson Smith.

▶ **Lawsuits.** Most recent is a legal complaint by HSUS with the Federal Trade Commission against Smithfield Foods’ and McDonald’s efforts to communicate food product transparency to consumers. Johnson Smith explains that activist groups don’t want consumers to see the real truth about how animals are cared for from birth to death, because it takes away from the power of their undercover videos.

▶ **Popular shows,** i.e., Oprah. She’s not vegan but has given them a lot of airtime. Dr. Oz also has featured vegan and animal agriculture stories.

▶ **Books.** *Eating Animals* by author Jonathan Safran Foer, a work that inaccurately portrays modern animal agriculture as cruel while advocating for vegetarianism, was a summer reading project for 2011 incoming freshmen at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill and Duke University. New students were asked to read the text and then participated in a series of group discussions that culminated in a campus event featuring Foer as a guest speaker. According to the Alliance, these university leaders say the summer reading was meant to promote critical thinking and discussion.

Fig. 1: Activist Web (located at www.animalagalliance.org: animal rights)



► **Ballot initiatives.** Placing animal rights issues on state ballots and using propaganda to appeal to the emotions of voters is becoming a favored tactic among these organizations. According to the Alliance, initiatives or referendums are allowed in 24 of 50 states. HSUS has great disrespect for state legislatures, and has been unsuccessful when appealing to them. “And this is why they focus so much time on ballot initiatives,” says Johnson Smith.

On its website, HSUS ranks animal-friendly states, and the least-friendly states with ballot initiatives are top targets. Johnson Smith points out that once HSUS wins favor in one state, it sets a precedent for others. For example, passing the ballot initiative in Florida in 2002 to take away the rights of farmers to use gestation crates made it easier for them to go to Arizona and do similar work.

Some of the tactics used by activists in ballot initiative campaigns include:

- presenting vague, intentionally misleading language on petitions;
- hiring out-of-state staff to gain signatures on petitions;
- running undercover operations (video);
- holding press conferences and having a video release via the Internet;
- utilizing social media, Facebook and Twitter;
- writing blogs/submitted articles to the mainstream population, especially targeting the younger generation engaged in social media;
- encouraging conversations in churches and faith-based communities, suggesting to leaders they engage members in discussions of compassion and animal treatment; and
- placing TV, radio and newspaper advertisements, all usually targeted to very specific times and events.

Legislation dictating animal care is becoming prevalent at the state level. As Missouri more recently found out with Proposition B (a bill with ambiguous language that targeted puppy mills), “language is very, very important” on ballot initiatives because, while similar, pets and their care do differ from livestock production.

Johnson Smith advises that the definitions of words are critical in how states proceed to write language for animal well-being. For example, “torture” is a word to be careful with, especially in relation to animal agriculture and its practices. “We want to get rid of the bad actors, but be careful how you word some of the language. It may come back to haunt you,” she says.

The Alliance highly encourages producers to stay up-to-date on what is happening in states, as the outcome of bills — often lobbied

About the Animal Agriculture Alliance

The nonprofit Animal Agriculture Alliance is a broad-based coalition of individual farmers, ranchers, producer organizations, suppliers, packer-processors, scientists, veterinarians and retailers. Realizing animal rights groups were becoming a threat to our industry, and animal agriculture needed one voice, the former Animal Industry Foundation was created in 1987. It changed some 10 years ago to the Animal Agriculture Alliance.

“We work to connect all stakeholders across the entire animal agriculture industry,” Kay Johnson Smith, executive vice president and the chief spokesperson for the alliance, explains. “Our goal is to educate the public and media about the importance of this industry and protect consumers’ rights to choose foods that meet their budgets and own values, and to protect your rights farming and ranching.”

Johnson Smith says her staff is small and young, but it is “very, very passionate about agriculture and what we do.” The Alliance has a wealth of information on its website at www.animalagalliance.org to assist producers. It recently unveiled a new website, www.RealFarmersRealFood.com.

Also log into www.humanewatch.org, another authoritative source that’s keeping a “watchful eye” on the HSUS.

for by activist organizations — may affect methods and costs of food-animal production. One of the many resources the Alliance offers is an interactive map on its website that tracks pending legislation as related to animal care and ownership (see www.animalagalliance.org and click on legislation).

What should agriculture do?

Keeping abreast of pending legislation that could affect animal care and ownership is certainly one way to keep ahead of the activist curve, but Johnson Smith also has these suggestions for what producers can do to help maintain their ability to produce a safe, wholesome food source as economically and practically as possible:

- Implement Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) practices.
- Train all employees who work with

animals on how you expect them to treat and handle animals and to understand what your policies are. Have them sign agreements saying they agree to carry out these policies. Documents like these, and BQA records, can be “insurance policies.” In the event your operation is a victim of an undercover attack, “they hold weight with the media and community that you did the right thing,” Johnson Smith says.

- Start a website to tell your story and share the values of your family and business with customers and others up and down the food chain. Highlight your animal care and stewardship. “People want to know who their neighbors are,” Johnson Smith points out. “Give them your story, the

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Be watchful when hiring

The activist tactic of obtaining illicit employment at a farm or processing plant in order to acquire video intended to malign the reputation of farmers and ranchers is becoming increasingly common.

The Animal Agriculture Alliance recommends that all producers ensure high standards of animal welfare by following approved industry guidelines. They should also review their hiring practices, train employees on proper animal handling according to company policy, and hold all workers accountable for their actions.

Based on undercover activist videos released to the media and public within the last two years, the Alliance shares the following information from its website.

In all cases, the undercover videos were provided weeks or months after the individuals had left employment. The videos were initially provided to either the media or the USDA, but not directly to the businesses involved.

In most cases, employers realized — after the fact — who the former undercover employee had been. They also recognized — after the fact — many behaviors or actions demonstrated by the undercover employee that allowed them to have access to the animals and to produce videos, whether of real or staged animal mistreatment.

Some of the behaviors included:

- ▶ Befriending or mingling with upper management — asking questions about operations, including security matters or time schedules.
- ▶ Volunteering for jobs before or after normal business hours.
- ▶ Volunteering for jobs that are less desirable, but would provide them access to the animals, often before or after normal business hours.
- ▶ Seeking employment in jobs below their skill or education level; demonstrating previous jobs or experiences out of character for the job they were seeking.
- ▶ Seeking employment with no pay — so they can “learn more about the business before committing to that field,” either with regard to their education or possibly before starting their own business.
- ▶ Using an out-of-state driver’s license.

The Alliance urges producers to use caution when hiring new employees and suggests following the recommendations outlined in its Farm & Facility Security Recommendations Report. It is available in the members section of the Alliance’s website.

It’s critical, it says, that those in the industry take extra security precautions to prevent getting targeted by animal rights groups looking for video to aid in their fundraising efforts and political campaigns.

Activists have shown that they will work every angle in their quest to put all farmers, ranchers and meat processors out of business. The first step for every farm operator is to ensure that top quality animal care is provided at all times.

information they need, so they hear from you and not the activist.”

- ▶ Be transparent. More companies are working toward this by showing videos of their farm and/or providing virtual tours. Johnson Smith says these resources help “take the mystery” out of our industry and agriculture as a whole. A few websites she notes as good examples for wording regarding animal care, customer commitment, suppliers and employees include:
www.smithfieldfoods.com and *www.smithfieldcommitments.com*
www.goodegg.com (Rose Acre Farms, includes a 24-hour hen-house webcam)
www.fofarms.com (Fair Oaks Farms Dairy; virtual tour; dairy open to public)
www.belstramilling.com (video welcomes public to pork operation)
www.mcdonalds.com (click on ‘Food’, ‘See What We’re Made Of’)
- ▶ Invite and help educate media. For example, Cargill invited Oprah into one of its processing plants.
- ▶ Become an activist for our industry. Meet with your customers, legislators and the media; show them the positives and how people in ag help provide nutritious meals to America. “That is a story to tell,” encourages Johnson Smith, “and more need to be telling it.”
- ▶ Donate and/or sponsor events in your community and make sure you tell others about this. Post to Facebook or add to your website.
- ▶ Work from the grassroots by making presentations about the industry at your local Chamber of Commerce, Lion’s Club, etc.
- ▶ Work to add agricultural education back into schools. “One of the biggest problems we have,” says Johnson Smith, “is people don’t understand the importance of agriculture.”
- ▶ Cooperate with legislators to protect agriculture.

“The opposition is not going away,” Johnson Smith assures. Groups like HSUS want to regulate producers out of business. She recommends producers budget this into business plans, and get on board to help expose activist groups for what they are.

“Get involved and tell our industry’s story,” she concludes.

