

Do We Need Industry Standards?

Industry experts
share consumer attitudes, activist agendas.

by Troy Smith

We don't hear the term "animal husbandry" much anymore. It has an old-fashioned ring, one that doesn't seem to fit the scientific, techno-savvy nature of modern livestock production. In its day, "husbandry" described the collective practices applied by animal caretakers, denoting concern for the well-being of livestock, as well as their practical use for the production of food.

Most beef cattle producers share that concern for the well-being or welfare of their herds. They view good husbandry as an ethical and moral responsibility. Most consumers claim to recognize the ethical and moral value of treating farm and ranch animals humanely. Animal rights activists have appealed to consumer concern for animal welfare to gather support for their cause. Some animal rights organizations quite skillfully hide their true agenda, which is to put an end to animal agriculture

and stop the consumption of meat. And, honestly, many consumers don't understand the difference between animal rights and animal welfare.

The activist groups won't explain the difference. Their objective is to gather money, which many have done quite successfully. Reportedly, contributions to major animal rights groups have increased by 5% since 2006. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) reported the receipt of donations and gifts totaling more than \$28 million in 2007, and the current annual budget for the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) is said to be \$220 million.

Certainly, many contributors know exactly what they are doing and support an animal rights agenda. But what does the majority of the consuming public think? Some insight into what ordinary people want was shared at the International

Symposium on Beef Cattle Welfare, hosted earlier this summer on the campus of Kansas State University (K-State). Among the 20 U.S. and international experts on cattle welfare making presentations was Jayson Lusk, an Oklahoma State University (OSU) economist who shared results of research aimed at discovering what the average consumer thinks about how animals should be raised.

Lusk said a survey asked more than 1,000 consumers, randomly chosen, to respond to questions related to animal welfare issues. The survey responses suggest the average consumer ranks animal welfare below other societal issues.

"Human poverty is still six times more important than the well-being of farm animals," Lusk states, saying health care and food safety also rank above animal welfare. "But people still want welfare issues to be worked on."

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►Oklahoma veterinarian Bob Smith, past chairman of the NCBA Animal Health and Well-Being Committee, says industry leadership must prioritize animal welfare issues.



►"The goal is to ensure the welfare of animals while facilitating their use for human purposes," says Gail Golab, director of AVMA's Animal Welfare Division.



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According to Lusk, survey respondents ranked provision of ample food and water as most important to animal welfare, followed by treatment of disease or injury. Consumers also thought it was important for animals to be allowed to display normal behavior and exercise outdoors.

Generally, Lusk adds, consumers think animal welfare is important — just not as important as they might say it is. The research suggests they are receptive to reasoning and will consider why certain animal production practices are used.

Jim Sartwelle III, livestock economist for the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) agrees, saying, “Animal welfare is not necessarily a top-of-mind issue, but it’s there. Most consumers keep it in perspective.”

Nonetheless, the extreme activist groups are gaining momentum. They have money — big money — to campaign against animal production practices. Sartwelle notes their success in securing legislation outlawing certain poultry, hog and veal production practices in seven states. Activist groups also pushed legislation banning horse slaughter in the U.S. Even if they do not represent the views of most consumers, the well-funded activist groups are framing the animal welfare issue, and the whole of animal agriculture is under attack.

“Nothing less than the future of animal agriculture is at stake,” Sartwelle says, advising producers to act now to appeal to the majority of consumers who remain

willing to listen. He urged producers to show consumers that they care. He warned against thinking of animal welfare issues as a “coastal” problem. It’s everywhere, and he urged producers to defuse the activists close to home first.

“Let consumers know what you do, how you do it and why,” Sartwelle says. “Act like the third-grade class is visiting your place and watching you, every day.”

Speaking from the harvest segment’s standpoint, Cargill Meat Solutions representative Mike Siemens doubts the average consumer worries much about animal management practices. However, Cargill’s customers include franchise restaurants like McDonald’s and Burger King. Those companies, Siemens says, have been the targets of carefully orchestrated attacks by animal rights extremists. PETA has even purchased stock in some companies in an effort to influence meat-buying decisions.

“Under pressure from the extremists, these companies are asking us what we are doing to influence welfare issues ‘upstream,’ on farms and ranches,” Siemens explains. “I expect more customers like ours will be pressured to be proactive in monitoring production practices. It’s going to get rougher.”

Oklahoma veterinarian Bob Smith, past chairman of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) Animal Health and Well-Being Committee, says industry leadership must prioritize animal welfare issues. Smith cited education and training as a cornerstone of the NCBA-driven Beef

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Quality Assurance (BQA) program. While there is broad assumption that animal care and handling come as second nature to people raised in livestock production, there exists a need for both basic training and continuing education.

Smith says successful improvements to beef quality issues — the initial thrust of BQA — shows that industry-driven programs can work. He noted subsequent efforts including development of “Cattle Care

and Handling Guidelines,” the “Master Cattle Transporter” training program for livestock haulers and a new animal handling training program for auction markets.

“Certainly, a BQA objective is to enhance consumer perception of beef and beef producers,” Smith says. “We want to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. And we want consumers to know it.”

Many of today’s common animal production practices were adopted to increase efficiency, enhancing both the abundance and affordability of food. Enjoying both, as it has for a long time, society can then afford to question how food is produced.

According to Gail Golab, director of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Animal Welfare Division, society will likely force adoption of animal welfare regulations if it is not confident in the industry’s voluntary approach. The challenge to the industry, when implementing a voluntary animal welfare policy, is to get it right for animals, for businesses and for consumers.

“The goal is to ensure the welfare of animals while facilitating their use for human purposes. You have to review how and why you do things,” Golab says. “If nothing else, remember that no matter how much scientific sense it makes, every production practice must pass the smell-test of society.”

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