

Ag Under Fire

A recent report by the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production criticizes modern-day agriculture.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Negative perceptions about livestock production are nothing new to the industry. But a new report questioning the integrity and sustainability of modern-day livestock practices — and making broad recommendations for change — has many up in arms over the issue.

The report was released in late April by the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production and encompasses a two-year study into the “impacts on humans, animals and the environment of intensive food animal production.”

Overall, the report suggests that the current “industrial farm animal production” system often poses unacceptable risks to public health, the environment and the welfare of the animals themselves.

Specifically, the Pew Commission called for six immediate and significant changes:

1. Ban the nontherapeutic use of antimicrobials in food-animal production.
2. Implement a disease-monitoring program to allow 48-hour traceback in a fully integrated and robust national database.
3. Implement a new system to deal with farm waste as an industrial operation.

4. Phase out within 10 years the use of such practices as gestation crates and battery cages.
5. Amend and enforce laws to provide a level playing field for producers when entering contracts with integrators.
6. Increase funding for, expand and reform animal-agriculture research.

Clarification needed

In response to the recommendations, the Animal Agriculture Alliance, a broad-based coalition of producers, suppliers, packer-processors, private industry and retailers, expressed dismay at the study. The organization’s executive vice president Kay Johnson Smith says, “After reviewing the recommendations, we feel important clarifications are in order.”

Namely, Smith says her organization questions the validity of the Pew Commission’s findings because it appears not all of the available information was considered.

She explains that initially the Commission’s mission statement promised the public it would conduct a “comprehensive, fact-based and balanced examination” of the issues with final recommendations based on a series of

independently researched, written and reviewed technical reports. However, Smith says the technical reports have not been approved by the experts involved and are not publicly available to support the recommendations.

“Despite our best efforts, we were not a meaningful part of the commission’s activities. Much of the information and many of the experts offered to the commission were apparently either ignored or not used by the commission when formulating these recommendations. Highly respected experts from major land-grant universities who either made presentations to the commission or conducted research at its request stated that they felt the commissioners had preconceived notions about the U.S. livestock industry,” Smith says.

Moreover, Smith argues, the information released by the commission is not new.

“It is based largely on old data and the opinions of the commissioners,” she says. “It ignores the fact that antibiotics are used in a safe and responsible manner in the livestock, dairy and poultry industries and that a ban is completely uncalled-for. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has science-based procedures in place that are far preferable to the politically driven Pew process.”

Additionally, the Animal Agriculture Alliance says the Pew report ignores the many positive initiatives the animal ag industry has developed in recent years. Examples of these initiatives include:

- ▶ the pork and beef industry’s quality assurance programs that include components for responsible use of antibiotics, food safety and animal transportation;
- ▶ the National Dairy Animal Well-Being Initiative designed to bring consistency to animal care practices across the country; and
- ▶ the American Feed Industry Association’s “Safe Feed – Safe Food” program.

“These initiatives are in addition to literally thousands of regulations that ensure our operations comply with federal, state and local laws,” Smith says.

Who is the Pew Commission?

The Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production (PCIFAP) was initiated in 2006 and was financed with \$2.6 million from the Pew Charitable Trusts and coordinated by the Center for a Livable Future (CLF) at Johns Hopkins University.

The Center for a Livable Future is a familiar anti-meat advocate, sponsoring programs such as the Meatless Monday Campaign, which encourages consumers to forgo one meat meal a week for health reasons.

In addition, CLF shares funding sources and fundamental beliefs with the Global Resource Action Center for the Environment (GRACE), which is known for the “Meatrix” series of short animated films that vilify modern production agriculture.

For more information see www.ncifap.org.

Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production

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Likewise, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) also supports the Animal Agriculture Alliance's defense of today's agricultural practices, emphasizing benefits and citing the following facts as examples:

- ▶ Antibiotics are used to treat or prevent disease in the cattle industry, and the *Producer Guidelines for Judicious Use of Antimicrobials* clearly states how these products should be used. By law, no meat sold in the United States is allowed to contain antibiotic residues that violate FDA standards.
- ▶ Improvements in beef production technology such as growth promotants have helped the beef industry use fewer resources to feed more people. University of Minnesota Extension researchers found that growth promotants increase annual beef production by more than 700 million pounds (lb.) while saving more than 6 billion lb. of feed. Years of government review and scientific studies of growth hormone use in cattle show the technology is safe for animals and humans. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) conducts random tests for residues of growth promotants in beef and the current

data show these products are being used safely and within government guidelines.

- ▶ Confined animal feeding operations (CAFO) are a great source of organic fertilizer. A 2006 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) study found that application of organic fertilizer (manure) to agricultural lands increased carbon sequestration capability. Moreover, according to the EPA, production of all food animals contributes less than 2.5% of total annual U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.

Working together

Looking to the future, South Dakota Cattlemen's Association President Scott Jones notes that despite the Pew Commission's report "those involved in animal agriculture know the truth." He points out that livestock production makes efficient use of resources, leading to a more affordable food product for all consumers, and improvements in livestock production technology have helped the industry do a better job of feeding more people.

"It's imperative for those of us in food production to use all of the tools available to ensure safe and adequate food supplies," Jones says.

The Animal Agriculture Alliance's Smith also notes that one area where her organization agrees with the Pew Commission is that the American animal agriculture industry cannot go back to what many people perceive as "the good old days" of smaller operations.

She cites a University of Minnesota study that suggests if 1955 technology were used to produce beef today, 165 million more acres of land would be needed. "With a growing global population that many project will add 3 billion more mouths to feed over the next 30 years," Smith says, "we need our livestock producers more than ever."

A viable ag industry in the future will require working together, Smith says. "Our industry welcomes open and transparent discussions that lead to beneficial changes, not biased reports that don't offer new solutions for food production."

The Animal Agriculture Alliance has extended an invitation to the Pew Commission to meet after the long-promised technical reports are released and reviewed. Smith says, "Our hope is that we can engage in an open and transparent discussion that will achieve our shared objective of providing a safe, abundant and affordable food supply."

