

# Farm Animal Welfare: What Do U.S. Consumers Think?

While activist groups continue to garner much media attention, survey results reveal most American consumers still understand and appreciate the role of animal agriculture in food production.

Story & photo by **Meghan Richey**

**W**e all lie. Intentionally or not, most of us do it to make ourselves look better or to say the things we think we're supposed to say. This can be problematic when trying to determine consumer attitudes through surveying. But researchers at the Bureau of Social Research at Oklahoma State University (OSU) found a way to cut through our attempts to bolster self image. In doing so, they came to some interesting conclusions about Americans' real perceptions of farm animal welfare.

American consumers don't care about farm animal welfare nearly as much as they say they do. In fact, they believe farm animal welfare is only important if it doesn't negatively affect U.S. farmers' economic well-being, OSU's survey results show.

Funded by the American Farm Bureau Federation, the 48-question telephone survey of more than 1,000 randomly selected American consumers was led by primary researcher Bailey Norwood, an OSU economist. Norwood shared the results of the survey at the National Institute for Animal Agriculture (NIAA) annual meeting earlier this year.

"People have a tendency to provide responses that make them look good, and they tell you what they think you want to hear," Norwood says. But through a carefully crafted series of direct and indirect questioning techniques, researchers were able to get a better snapshot of consumers' true feelings.

For example, when consumers were offered the direct statement, "It is important to me that animals on farms are well cared for," 95% agreed or strongly agreed. But when rephrased to an indirect statement, "The average American thinks that farm animal welfare is important," the agreement percentage dropped to 52%. Norwood says it is far more accurate to ask consumers for their perception of what other people think when trying to discern what they themselves actually believe.

While there are many valuable bits of information to take away from the survey,

Norwood says there are three lessons of particular importance for the livestock industry.

## Animals take a backseat to humans

"The first lesson is that the public cares far more about human welfare and farmers than they do farm animals," he says. "As a social issue, the financial well-being of U.S. farmers was found to be twice as important as the well-being of farm animals." To quantify the relative importance of human welfare vs. animal welfare, Norwood says that he used "innovative survey questions to determine the suffering of one human is equivalent to the suffering of 11,500 farm animals."

Additionally, human poverty, the U.S. health care system and food safety were found to be more than five times more important than farm animal well-being.

"While this does not imply that farm animal welfare is not important, it does imply that when forming public policy, the interests of farm animals take a backseat to the interests of humans," Norwood notes.

Consumers also consider costs when it comes to farm animal welfare. When asked if food companies were doing the right thing by enforcing higher standards with the phrase "regardless of cost" included, the number of consumers who thought it was the right thing declined by nearly 20% vs. without the phrase. Additionally, the majority of respondents believe farmers should be compensated if forced by food companies to comply with higher farm animal welfare standards.

## Purchasing choices equal welfare approval

The second lesson is that consumers understand that animal welfare is a result of their shopping decisions, in addition to farmer decisions.

"A majority of consumers believe their personal food choices have a large impact on the well-being of farm animals. Thus, when consumers choose to purchase traditionally



► Consumers understand that animal welfare is a result of their shopping decisions, in addition to farmer decisions, OSU economist Bailey Norwood says.

produced meat instead of more expensive meat raised under alternative production systems . . . they understand that their purchase directly determines the level of animal care provided.

"If consumers are happy purchasing traditionally produced meat, this signifies they approve of the animal care provided on traditional farms," Norwood continues. "They believe that if consumers actually desire higher animal welfare standards, food companies will provide it."

Supporting this conclusion is the respondents' agreement rate with the statement, "Food companies would voluntarily improve animal welfare, and would advertise as such, if people really wanted it." Sixty-eight percent agreed or strongly agreed.

Purchasing choices and survey responses also showed that low meat prices are more important to consumers than animal welfare. When participants were asked, "Do you think low meat prices are more important than animal welfare?" only 16% responded, "Yes." But when rephrased to a more accurately telling indirect question, "Does the average American believe low meat prices are more important than animal welfare?" 68% answered, "Yes."

## Consumer education

The third lesson is that consumers are much more accepting of confinement

practices if they are provided reasons other than reducing production costs. Specifically, the survey found that consumers are more accepting of the use of gestation crates for sows if they are told the practice offers the sows more protection.

When offered the statement, "Housing pregnant sows in crates is humane," only 18% of consumers agreed. However, when the statement was modified to, "Housing pregnant sows in crates for their protection from other hogs is humane," the agreement percentage jumped to 45%.

"This demonstrates the importance of educating consumers, but also that it is a difficult task. Even when educated about gestation crates, more than half of consumers still oppose them," Norwood says. Survey results also showed that the vast majority of respondents believe animals feel the same

pain as humans, so people imagine how they would feel in confinement and project those feelings onto animals.

Still, Norwood maintains that consumer education is a worthwhile task. "The survey does suggest that efforts by organizations to educate the public are not in vain," he says, noting that this is increasingly important as consumers receive more information about animal welfare from activists than they do from the agriculture industry.

Survey results show that 75% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement, "I would vote for a law in my state that would require farmers to treat their animals more humanely." This may indicate that activists have been more successful than the agriculture industry in sending messages to consumers. Norwood says agricultural organizations should step up efforts to

educate consumers about production practices and the reasons for the practices.

### **Listen to the consumer**

"Every business must understand its consumer. This survey provides unique insights into the mind of our consumer — every American that eats food," Norwood concludes. "By injecting these three lessons into every farm animal welfare debate, we help policy makers understand their consumer — the American voter."

He hopes the farm animal industry can continue to better understand consumer attitudes in order to diminish the disconnect between the two groups.

"Even if farmers disagree with consumers, it's still the consumers' food. That should be considered when raising and marketing animal products."

