

Understanding Activist Opposition

The Humane Society of the United States uses sophisticated tactics to pressure U.S. corporations and elected leaders into furthering the animal protection agenda in the name of ‘public demands.’

Story & photo by **Meghan Richey**

Just 20 years ago there was no sophisticated, organized block of animal rights groups working together to challenge American agriculture through the U.S. political scene. Today is an entirely different story.

“You would occasionally have a group of animal rights groups go to Capitol Hill and ask for something totally outrageous, like saying ‘Animal agriculture has to end tomorrow. Farmers are stupid and abusive, and we need to shut down the industry.’ Today we face a very precise and well-organized opposition working in coordinated fashion to challenge our every move,” says Steve Kopperud, founder and past president of the Animal Industry Foundation. Now called the Animal

Agriculture Alliance, the organization is an educational foundation representing livestock producers, animal scientists and agribusiness.

“We’ve gone from a scattering of animal rights groups that occasionally petitioned Congress for various ridiculous things to now having a very sophisticated focus on The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and an army of other organizations that I define as HSUS foot soldiers,” says Kopperud, who spoke at the National Institute for Animal Agriculture (NIAA) annual meeting in April.

These “soldiers” include Farm Sanctuary, the Animal Welfare Institute and the Humane Farming Association, among many others. On a national basis, Kopperud says, these are definitely “B-list” groups, but as grassroots groups for HSUS they perform a critical and valuable function in strengthening the now well-formed animal rights block that functions with the fluidity and strength of a well-oiled machine.

Fueling the machine

Federal law limits how much a federal charity, a 501(c)(3), can spend on advocacy — generally around 20% of the organization’s previous year’s spending. For HSUS this would be about \$1 million per year that they can spend on lobbying. But Kopperud says that for HSUS President Wayne Pacelle, this isn’t enough money to spread his extremist animal protection messages.

In 2004 Pacelle created the Humane Society Legislative Fund, which has 501(c)(4) status, the same status as a trade association, allowing unlimited spending on lobbying and advocacy. The HSUS web site describes the legislative fund as a separate lobbying affiliate of HSUS that “works to pass animal protection laws at the state and federal level, to educate the public about animal protection issues, and to support humane candidates for office.”

“The legislative fund is effectively the same organization as HSUS. They’re the ones who go forward with legislation in the states. They’re the ones who go forward with legislation on Capitol Hill, while HSUS continues to bill itself as cat and dog shelters and spaying and neutering,” Kopperud explains. “Pacelle is the face, voice and brains — and they are substantial.

“Anyone who underestimates Wayne Pacelle and his organizations is a fool. I used to say that Ingrid Newkirk, president of PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), was the most effective activist I had ever met, and I’ve now changed that to Wayne Pacelle,” he continues. “When he was hired by the Humane Society he made a simple declaration: ‘My intent is to create the National Rifle Association of the animal rights movement.’ He certainly has done so.”

Tactics

At more than 10 million members strong, averaging out to more than 20,000 members per congressional district, HSUS can generate incredible grassroots response.

“And they use this power to routinely threaten members of Congress who do not agree with them,” Kopperud says. “They take their threats even beyond demands to co-sponsor a bill or vote for a bill. If Congress[ional] members refuse to do what HSUS says, they are condemned in the media as cruel, unfeeling and uncaring.”

Congressman Steve King (R-Iowa) could be considered one of HSUS’s victims, Kopperud says. King was approached by HSUS to co-sponsor an animal fighting bill and he refused, saying that animal fighting was already illegal on the federal level and he wasn’t going to waste his time on a bill that repeats existing laws. “King ended up with radio, television and print ads run against him in his re-election campaign simply because he refused to co-sponsor a bill,” Kopperud says.

And, unfortunately, King has company. HSUS has also condemned others this way in South Carolina, New Jersey, Vermont, Nebraska, Montana and California.

Another favorite tactic is when PETA and HSUS team up to bookend a corporation. “The nicest way to refer to it is corporate intimidation, but I think I’ve heard it best put as corporate blackmail,” Kopperud says. “PETA is more blatant about it, and HSUS is more subtle, but they both play their role in doing it.” Essentially, PETA plays “bad cop” and HSUS plays “good cop.”

Kopperud describes the situation this way: “The PETA activists approach a corporation and say, ‘If you don’t want us to picket your restaurants, if you don’t want us to make public statements condemning



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you, if you don't want us to disrupt your annual meeting, then here's a nifty little list of demands we'd like you to take a look at.'

"The first hit is always from PETA. They're the crazies. They take their clothes off and do anything to keep the issue in front of the public. And then there comes a follow-behind by HSUS, who says, 'Don't worry about the crazies. We're the moderates. You can work with us. We can find a happy middle ground,'" Kopperud explains. "Now, if you are a corporation [that] exists to protect its brand, what are you going to do? You're going to work with them out of fear."

To garner the most public attention, Kopperud explains, both activist organizations make sure conversations take place in the media through press releases, never privately. The unfortunate part, Kopperud says, is that this type of pressured action exceeds corporations' market-based decision making.

"They do this because the corporations have been convinced by HSUS that the great majority of the public will care sufficiently to either maintain brand loyalty or switch brand loyalty."

Public demands

To demonstrate this point, Kopperud refers to an article he read about Burger King that was published in *The New York Times* following the fast-food restaurant's press release declaring that it would seek suppliers of pork who did not use confinement in production. The article asked if Burger King's customers brought this issue to them and if they were acting in response. Burger King said they had heard nothing from their customers about confinement-free pork production. The article then asked why they were making this change. Kopperud reports that Burger King replied it "wanted to stay ahead of the issue the way a hockey player stays ahead of the puck."

The article then asked what this change would do to pork producers' farm incomes, and Burger King said it did not know. The article then asked what this change would do to the cost of food in their restaurants, and Burger King said it did not know. So once again the article asked why they were making this change, and the company said, "the public demands it."

Replying with a more-than-moderate level of outrage, Kopperud challenges Burger King to "show me that. I want to see the data. Members of Congress want to see the hard evidence that says, en masse, all 300 million Americans are demanding these changes.

"There is no data that says the public demands this," he continues. "Instead,

The Humane Society of the United States has created an incredible political machine capable of convincing hordes of people of things that simply are not true. The 'public' does not demand this."

Tell the customer

The reason American agriculture is constantly challenged by animal protection groups, Kopperud says, is that nobody understands what we do. That allows our opposition to cast us in various different lights, including, of course, the worst possible light.

"I think what every livestock group in America needs to do is begin to sell less product and sell more producer and more process," he says.

"If producers are professionals, tell the customer. If producers have experience and expertise, tell the customer. If programs exist routinely on animal health, well-being and welfare, tell the customer," he continues. "The customer wants assurances, and the best people to give those assurances are the men and women who produce our food."

