

Brasher: Morality debate coming on farm livestock

*By Philip Brasher
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April 2, 2006 - Here's a question most farmers would never think would need to be answered, much less asked: Is it morally right to do what they do?

But that's just the question that livestock producers are going to face in coming years, says Wes Jamison, director of the Agricultural Stewardship Center at Dordt College in Sioux Center.

"What is your moral rationale for doing what you do? Agriculture hasn't even begun to ask that question," Jamison told a recent gathering of industry officials set up by the Animal Agriculture Alliance.

The public's attitudes toward animals and agriculture are changing, and farmers can't ignore what's happening, Jamison says.

To conventional producers, confining animals for the entirety of their lives is the best way of producing the most meat at the least cost.

But that's a tough sell to people who have no background in contemporary farming and whose chief experience with animals is with their own pets.

Consumers "are looking for permission to believe we're doing the right thing," says industry consultant Charlie Arnot. "They don't want to hear that we're doing it because it makes us more money."

A poll of Ohioans in 2004 found significant interest in the welfare of farm animals. Eighty-one percent of those surveyed in the Ohio State University poll said the well-being of livestock was as important as the well-being of pets.

Animal scientists, producers and industry executives would argue that productive livestock are by definition well-treated. Or they would argue that we shouldn't set animal-welfare standards without solid scientific evidence. But those arguments can be a tough sell, too.

"If you think you can use a scientific or economic argument to refute a moral argument, you are sorely mistaken," says Jamison. "Once society believes that something is right morally, they will act."

So what is the moral argument for confinement operations?

Jamison doesn't have one at the ready.

The biblical principle that humans were given dominion over animals (see Genesis) doesn't quite work: Muzzling an ox was proscribed in the Old Testament. And the Sabbath rest applied to farm animals as well as people.

One argument that might work for farmers, according to Jamison, is the need for biosecurity.

For example, in the time of avian influenza, keeping poultry indoors is the preferred way to prevent them from being exposed to infected wild birds.

For now, livestock farming is essentially unregulated, but that could change in coming years. In the Ohio poll, slightly fewer than half the respondents favored regulating farms.

The animal rights community would like for Congress to someday extend the federal Animal Welfare Act to farm animals. The law now regulates the treatment of pets, lab animals and zoo animals.

"We are essentially in a pre-regulation phase in dealing with animals reared for food," says Wayne Pacelle, chief executive of the Humane Society of the United States.

Note his words: "pre-regulation phase."

His group's short-term goals include writing into law the Agriculture Department's temporary ban on slaughtering downer cattle and requiring government purchasing programs, including the one for school lunches, to impose animal-welfare standards on meat suppliers.

"We don't believe that agriculture should be reduced entirely to matters of economics and efficiency," says Pacelle. "When you're dealing with living creatures, there are ethical questions that ultimately must be confronted."

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