

Animal Rights Groups No Joke, Warns Missouri Ag Professor

By David Bowser

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. — Be afraid. Be very afraid.

Animal rights groups are here to stay. The livestock industry is in a war, and they don't even know it, says Dr. Beth Walker with Missouri State University at Springfield, Mo.

She grew up on a farm near Del Rio, raising sheep, goats and horses.

"My grandparents had a ranch out at Cedar Station," Walker says. "Out toward Sanderson."

She and her husband have a place north of Springfield today where she raises sheep, goats and horses.

As part of her day job, teaching agricultural courses at Missouri State University here, she teaches a class on animal rights entitled "The Animal Rights Movement and the Societal Construction of Reality."

"The course is a general education course," Walker says. "We look at a variety of concerns within the animal rights movement."

She says that over the years of teaching the class and learning more about animal rights, she has learned that the movement grew from an off-the-wall fringe concept that few people took seriously to a very powerful, very well funded and a very strong societal movement.

"It's not just in the United States," she says. "It's everywhere. It's this worldwide issue."

Animal rights groups can be found in Muslim countries and in Christian countries, she says.

"It doesn't matter where," Walker says. "We have them in India, in Pakistan, in Saudi Arabia. It's not just a European and American issue. They have them in China, Russia, you name it, and we've got these animal rights type groups."

The Netherlands is a big area for the animal rights movement.

"In fact, there's a group right now in Austria that is trying to get an ape granted human status so they can receive donations," Walker says. They want the chimpanzee granted basic rights and declare them humans.

"That was on Fox News, and they were laughing about it," Walker says of the commentators. "I got a little irritated because it isn't a laughing matter. These people are thinking that it's funny. It's not funny. It's something that's very serious, and it's going to become more serious in society."

As fewer and fewer people are employed in production agriculture, she says, agriculture is facing increased challenges.

"We are less than two percent of the population," Walker points out. "We have 98 percent, at least in America, that have strong concerns about what we do."

Harvard Law School was one of the first to establish a syllabus in animal rights.

Walker says more and more law schools are forming animal law wings.

"It's not just Harvard," she warns.

Television game show host Bob Barker, a proponent of animal rights, has given a million dollars to each of six universities with law schools to establish animal rights programs.

"It's much, much bigger than Harvard," Walker says.

There are a lot of different reasons for the advancement of animal rights issues, she says. It would be a mistake to cite just one.

"I don't know if any one of them really covers the reason for the whole movement," Walker says. "For some, they read a book."

The book, *Animal Liberation*, by Peter Singer, was first published in the 1970s.

"It was a big wake-up call to the animal rights movement," Walker says, "and really generated a lot of momentum here in the United States."

After the Vietnam War, she says, the animal rights movement really seemed to start growing.

While it would appear that the activists and protestors simply needed something to protest in the post-war period, Walker says it has to be taken much more seriously than that.

"It's not that they just needed something to do," she counters. "They really think that this is where society should go."

It comes down to speciesism. That is when a person or group is biased against species not their own.

"Speciesism is a takeoff on racism and sexism," Walker says. "That's how they see this. They see this as racism, sexism and speciesism. They are all negative. Seeing animals as different from your own species is just as bad and immoral to them as being sexist or racist. It's one and the same with these groups."

Sweden has changed its constitution to include animals.

"They even had people with animal rights agendas specifically elected to their Congress," Walker says. She fears that's where the United States is headed.

Walker points to pending legislation over horse slaughter.

"What's the difference between a horse and a cow?" Walker asks. "Whenever they get this law passed, the next step will be other forms of livestock."

The anti-horse slaughter bill has begun to have consequences even before its passage.

"There are already people up here who have been 'horsed,'" Walker says.

She explains that the term 'horsed' refers to people who have turned horses loose because they no longer want the horse, and they can't sell them somewhere.

"There are people here who have come home and had a horse that's not theirs at their place," Walker says, "because people cannot afford to sell them and cannot afford to keep them."

The animal rights activists say that eventually people will quit breeding them.

"That's worked really well for dogs and cats," Walker says pointedly. "It's a lot more expensive to put horses in a shelter than it is a dog or a cat."

Walker says Florida changed its state constitution a few years ago to give rights to hogs. "It passed overwhelmingly," she says.

Arizona recently outlawed farrowing crates.

She says animal rights activists went to Florida and Arizona because they didn't have large swine operations that could battle the legislation.

"There's only a few hog producers there that could fight it," Walker says.

She says animal rights activists are looking at other small states.

"There's a referendum right now in Colorado that's going to have strong effects on production agriculture," Walker says. "Anywhere they've tried to get a referendum passed, it has passed. They have not lost yet. The animal rights groups have not lost yet. People had better wake up."

This isn't just PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, dressing someone up as a cow for a stunt.

"PETA is small scale when you look at the Humane Society of the United States," Walker says. She points out that the Humane Society of the United States is different from the local humane society.

"Let's make that distinction," she says. "Unfortunately, I believe that many people think it's the same thing. They think when they're donating to the Humane Society of the United States, they're donating to their local chapters, and they're not. It's a totally different group of people."

The Humane Society of the United States, she explains, is the largest and most powerful animal welfare group in the country.

"They say they're a welfare group," Walker says. "They're not. They're an animal rights group."

The Humane Society of the United States has a \$100 million operating budget.

"And they're just getting stronger," Walker says.

She says the Humane Society of the United States consists of some very influential people.

"These are not dumb people," Walker says. "They have some dumb people in their groups, but who doesn't? We can say the same thing for production agriculture."

The leaders in the Humane Society of the United States are well educated.

"They have a lot of money," Walker says. "They have a lot of lawyers. They have some medical doctors, which are a very fringe group, but these are not dumb people."

She says even though PETA does some dumb things, they get people's attention.

"Right now, there's a new lady that just kind of popped onto the animal rights scene,"

Walker says. "Her name is Nanci Alexander. She just divorced the owner of the Houston Rockets, Leslie Alexander."

Nanci Alexander supposedly has some \$115 million to play with, Walker says.

"She started up her own animal rights foundation with \$104 million," Walker says. "She has also sent PETA \$15 million, and \$20 million has gone to the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine."

Even though the name of the group is Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, Walker says that fewer than five percent of the membership are physicians.

But like the Humane Society of the United States, the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine is one of the respectable animal rights groups. They don't pull stunts in the street, nor do they burn down research labs.

Nanci Alexander, however, has donated to SHAC, Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty, a group that does encourage violence against what they call vivisectionists, people who conduct research on animals.

"They cut into an animal while it's alive," Walker says. "They're under anesthesia, but they're called vivisectionists."

Walker says SHAC is an extreme animal rights group that is popular in England.

The organization is under investigation in connection with a series of letter bombs that were mailed in England.

"All of these groups make me very, very concerned," Walker says. "When you look at the amount of dollars that they're divvying up, they're very powerful, and we need to start taking them more seriously."

These animal rights groups are growing, Walker says.

"This is a case where people in agriculture have been on the defense," Walker says, "but that's not enough." Using a football analogy from her native Texas, Walker says Odessa Permian doesn't win unless their offense and defense are good.

"If your offense is good but you have no defense," she says, "your offense gets worn down. If your defense is good but you have no offense, your defense gets worn down."

She says agriculture has no offense in the war with animal rights groups.

"We cannot win this unless we have an offense," Walker says, "and we have none."

Most people in agriculture think society will know better than to believe a lot of the animal rights people.

"They don't," Walker says. "I'm telling you that some of the people in my class ask me questions and I know they don't know."

The students in her animal rights class are not agriculture majors. They ask if chocolate milk comes from brown cows.

"We laugh at that," Walker says, "but some people don't get that that's a joke."

She says the public has to be educated about why agriculture does what it does.

"But we also need to start looking at ourselves," Walker says, "and cleaning up our own act."

She says she gets pretty irate when it comes to unethical behavior.

"We've got to take the high ground," Walker says.

She says the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the hog producers and the sheep industry are all aware of these animal rights groups.

Walker says that even Paul Harvey, that stalwart of rural radio, has said positive things about PETA.

Walker says a lot of kids are being indoctrinated with animal rights messages. She won't let her three year-old son watch Scooby-do cartoons on television because the voice of one of the characters is a vegetarian and is an activist.

"I've noticed here lately that Scooby and Shaggy don't eat meat anymore," Walker says.

"They get soy burgers or tofu burgers. I've seen this twice, and I said no more."

She says PETA has some well done websites that are specifically targeted to small children.

"They call your Daddy a murderer because he eats meat," she says.

She says the Humane Society of the United States will sit at a rodeo and take hours and hours of video, waiting for that one moment when something goes wrong.

"That's what they film," Walker says.

She says it's been her experience growing up in rural settings that people in agriculture oppose cruelty. They take care of their animals. "If you take care of them," Walker says, "they'll take care of you."

She says a lot of farmers and ranchers take care of their animals, but there have been some problems with intensive operations, but even then, she says, those corporate farmers are starting to look at what they're doing.

While Walker has little use for many of the animal rights groups, she also warns those in agriculture that they need to be aware of their actions and how those actions are perceived by consumers.

"You'd better wake up and see what the consumer's saying," Walker says.

She says agriculture does not have enough advocates. Somewhere in an ag student's education, and probably all students, there needs to be some sort of class like the one she teaches on animal rights groups.

"Not enough of it is being taught, I don't think," Walker says. "It's more than just PETA. They grab the headlines, but they're the tip of the iceberg."

Walker says that because animal rights groups make such a commotion about eating meat, most people think vegetarianism is on the rise.

"It's really not," Walker says. "Meat consumption is actually increasing worldwide, but that's also because there's more people."

Vegetarians, she says, are not all bad.

"I have friends who are vegetarians," Walker says, "but they just don't like the taste of meat. They don't like the texture of meat."

It's the extremists who worry her.

"They're not loco," Walker says. "They don't think the animals should get to vote, but they basically feel that animals should be free from consumption, free from use in medical research, free from any service activities. They certainly hate rodeos and circuses and zoos."

They oppose the fur industry, Walker adds.

"They don't believe in pets, either," she says. "They're your companions."

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