



DEAD COWS DON'T LIE!! MOO NEWS TELLS YOU WHY!

The Sticky Welfare Wicket – what do we need to know? What should we be thinking about?

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On November 8, 2009 the first International Educational Symposium on Animal Welfare sponsored by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) was held at MSU. The conference was an eclectic collection of animal welfare scientists, veterinarians from all areas of practice, academia, laboratory animal, government, ethicists, philosophers, media, and veterinary students. As a veterinarian with a beef practice and a seed stock producer, I thought it was an important meeting to attend.

Several things became clear at this conference:

- When it comes to scientifically studying animal welfare, the U.S. falls way behind Canada, Europe, New Zealand and Australia.
- When it comes to scientifically studying animal welfare, animal scientists, not veterinarians, have been on the forefront.
- U.S. veterinary medicine and veterinary schools have been slow to respond to issues of animal welfare.
- Veterinarians traditionally view themselves as “experts in animal welfare” yet few have any formal training or expertise.

Before we can fully discuss animal welfare, we must first define the term and establish a distinction between animal welfare and animal rights. Animal rights give legal rights and social status to the animal that is comparable to humans. Animal welfare involves the practices involved with animal care and husbandry.

When you see the Humane Society

of the United States (HSUS) glossy pamphlet showing a starving dog or the Hollywood starlet clutching a pathetic kitten, do you feel compelled to send them money to save the poor critters? That is what HSUS is counting on – the knee jerk compassion of most people. Before sending the cash, citizens need to dig a little deeper.

HSUS is NOT an animal welfare organization. It is an animal rights group – a well funded, lawyer-heavy, media savvy animal rights group that knows how to spin pictures for maximum emotional effect and maximum donations. The goal of HSUS is not only the elimination of animal agriculture but also the elimination of domestic animals. *“We have no ethical obligation to preserve the different breeds of livestock produced by selective breeding, one generation and out. We have no problems with the extinction of domestic animals. They are the creations of human selective breeding.”* Wayne Pacelle, President of HSUS, statement made at the Illinois Agricultural Leadership Foundation Conference, Wash. D.C., 3/10/1993.

What HSUS doesn't understand is that animal welfare is not a unidimensional concept – or perhaps because their interest is really not the welfare of animals, but political power, they don't care that welfare is not a unidimensional concept. An example used repeatedly at the conference, as well as a recent political move by HSUS in Michigan, is the housing of the every day laying hen. As beef producers, how often have we thought of the welfare of the hen? Do we view her welfare in the same unidimensional way that HSUS does, or do we understand that these concepts transcend species?

How do we assess the welfare of a hen or other animal? This is a highly

charged and emotional issue, where people's attitudes and beliefs influence their perceptions of what constitutes “good welfare”. Often the science gets lost in emotion. Using emotion to confuse welfare issues is exploited to perfection by the HSUS.

One way to look at welfare of any species is by reviewing “The Five Freedoms”, a 1965 British report that is considered by many as a seminal work in animal welfare.

The Five Freedoms include:

- Freedom from thirst, hunger, malnutrition
- Freedom from discomfort
- Freedom from pain, injury, disease
- Freedom to express normal behaviors
- Freedom from fear and distress

Few could argue that these are not reasonable when considering the welfare of any animal species. Another way to view animal welfare is to examine the three overlapping circles of Function, Feelings, and Natural Behavior, where Function reflects health, growth and reproduction; Feelings relate to the affective state, including pain, suffering and contentment, and Natural Behavior reflects the ability to do things that the species does because they are a cow, a hen, a horse, etc. For the laying hen, natural behaviors would include the ability to stand, sit down, turn around, spread her wings and flap, build a nest and take a dust bath. Who would argue that those would be good things for a hen to do? Virtually nobody – it's a “hen thing” and hens should be able to do “hen things”.

This notion is how HSUS plays the public. They show you a cage with a scrunched up hen that can't flap her wings, contrasted with a “smiling” hen standing and flapping her wings. What would you chose for your hen? HSUS is

hoping that you will buy the picture and not the science. So far, they have been right. The public and the legislatures across the nation have bought what HSUS is selling.

HSUS states, “battery cages used for egg production are inherently cruel, providing each hen with less space than a single sheet of paper to live on for her entire life. This extreme practice is so cruel that California has criminalized the use of battery cages in egg production (effective 2015); this week Michigan enacted a similar law.” (HSUS notes on Facebook, accessed 11/11/09).

So that’s it, battery cages are cruel and they should be banned because other systems are more humane. Well are they really? If you believe in the 5 freedoms of animal welfare, we have allowed the hen to express her normal behavior, but at what cost?

There has been extensive research on housing and welfare of the laying hen. If you are interested you can find the summary in the LayWel Report. This report has been summarized in a graph on the AVMA’s web page using the traffic light system – good welfare is “green”, bad welfare is “red” and intermediate welfare is “yellow”. The graphic allows you to easily see the trade offs in the various housing systems. Space constraints prevented us from printing the graphic, but it can be found at: avma.org/issues/animal_welfare/cage_noncage_systems.asp

The LayWel report provides scientific data to help guide us in our welfare decisions. Too often HSUS disregards science as it preys on the emotions of the uninformed public, and in the end the welfare of the animal may actually suffer. The LayWel report determined the following facts about hen housing systems:

Birds in battery cages may not have the ability to flap their wings, but they are much less likely to be eaten by their pen mates or die in the cage. Isn’t being pecked to death and eaten by a fellow hen a greater welfare concern than not being able to flap the wings?

Hens in battery cages can’t go into a nest box, but are less likely to have parasites than their free range counter parts, that are more likely to be eaten by predators. Which hen has the better welfare? The free-range hens will have

decreased production and decreased cleanliness than any of the caged hens.

Hens in open floor, single and multiple level housing are more likely to be able to engage in dust bathing, but the air quality suffers, and they are more likely to be smothered, develop bumble foot and be infected with parasites.

So which hen has the best welfare? The dead, free-range hen who could flap her wings before she was eaten by the neighborhood hawk, or the hen in the battery cage that can’t flap her wings but is disease free and alive? What is the appropriate trade-off for hen welfare? The HSUS doesn’t look at welfare of the hen in a global way – they pick an easy sell without consideration of the consequences to the hen.

Maintaining good welfare within housing systems involves trade-offs. The housing systems that allow hens to perform natural behaviors (e.g., nest building for laying hens) may, in fact, result in more challenges for disease and injury control. Conversely, im-

proving disease and injury control by more intensively confining hens can limit the hens’ freedom of movement and ability to engage in normal behaviors.

Now you may say to yourself, I don’t raise chickens what does the hen have to do with me? Step back and take a broader view. If you have cattle you may find yourself dehorning or castrating your stock. What would the public think if you ended up on youtube? How would you explain burning the head of a 12-month old heifer you forgot to dehorn, or cutting the testicles from a 15-month old bull without benefit of any pain control? Could you defend your practice? Is there science to state that what you are doing is “right”? Is there a better way to do it? If we don’t want other groups telling us how to do things, now is the time to review what we do and ask ourselves – “Would this pass the 60 Minutes test?”



Warm holiday wishes from our family to yours

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