

Through a Different Lens

Producers need to consider outside views.

by **Dave Daley**, California State University, Chico



Dave Daley shared his thoughts on animal welfare issues with Hereford breeders during the 2010 Annual Meeting Educational Forums. You can order a DVD with his and other forum presentations at HerefordPhotoshop.com.

The animal rights debate seems to get more divisive and argumentative each day. We spend our time looking at undercover videos, responding to false allegations or accusing the other side of trying to destroy all of animal agriculture.

As an industry, we do very little that is proactive, and we find ourselves in a defensive posture more often than not. My experience at a university — working with people who don't understand animal agriculture — has given me an appreciation for those with diverse and different viewpoints.

I have watched our students struggle to convince people that we truly care about our livestock and, for the most part, do the

right thing. Perhaps we need to change the way we talk to those we disagree with. Perhaps we should also learn to listen before we attack.

As I traveled from a speaking engagement in Idaho back to Sacramento a couple of months ago, I thought about how we have effectively lost the argument on animal welfare/rights in the minds of the general public. We are positioned as the "bad guy," always defending what we do.

I think there is a solution in learning how to dialogue and build trust with those that we disagree with. On that trip I penned a few ideas that I have observed over the past several years. These are sure-fire ways to lose our argument with the

Results from animal rights survey

The following survey was administered in three locations in 2009 to more than 200 participants. Those completing the survey included a cross-section of large and small producers, including purebred, cow-calf and stocker operators, as well as some young cattlemen and allied industry representatives.

Percentage response to most questions did not vary across type of producer or location of the survey. Surveys were conducted at Beef Day at California State University, Chico; the Harris Ranch Partnership for Quality Seminar, Coalinga, Calif.; and the California and Nevada Cattlemen and CattleWomen's Convention in Sparks, Nev.

Although the survey was not scientific, it is evident that cattlemen are interested in creating a proactive dialogue with people from outside our industry. A clear majority believes that animals have rights, and it was almost unanimous that animals "have the right to be treated humanely and ethically."

The small percentage of respondents who said animals don't have the right often clarified by commenting, "We have the responsibility to treat animals humanely and ethically, but it is not a right."

With respect to the questions on non-ambulatory (downer) cows at the sale barn, it is already illegal to transport a non-ambulatory cow to slaughter. However, cattlemen were adamant that we shouldn't take that act lightly — even suggesting criminal/civil penalties when it does occur.

Perhaps the most interesting observation is how willing cattle producers were to investigate practical, cost-effective solutions to what could be considered invasive practices (castration, dehorning, etc.). The fact that cattle producers are willing to look for solutions that continue to improve the stewardship and welfare of the animals they care for is a testament to their progressive, forward-looking nature.

Questions and results:

Do animals have rights?

Yes. — 65%
No. — 35%

Do animals have the right to be raised and treated humanely?

Yes. — 94%
No. — 6%

What should be the consequences for a sale barn if it unloads a downer cow and leaves her in public view?

None, it is private property. — 6%
The sale barn should be required to have an enclosed area to euthanize and dispose of such animals. — 66%
It is the animal owner's fault not the sale barn's. — 11%
Civil and/or criminal penalties, it should be illegal. — 17%

What should be the consequences for a producer if he/she unloads a downer cow and leaves her in public view?

None, it is private property. — 10%
The individual should be required to have an enclosed area to euthanize. — 64%
Civil and/or criminal penalties, it should be illegal. — 26%

If you were working cattle along a highway and someone stopped to take pictures, what would you do?

Tell him/her it is private property, "Please leave." — 4%
Tell him/her to, "Get the heck out of here." — 2%
Engage in conversation and find out his/her interest in your operation. — 85%
Ignore him/her. — 6%

Which of these statements best represents how often prods are used in your operation?

Never. — 8%
Occasionally. — 84%
Regularly. — 8%

Do you think cattlemen should talk with animal rights groups to reach some understanding?

Never. — 2%
Depends on the situation. — 43%
Yes. — 55%

If there was an economic and reasonable alternative to castration, would you adopt it?

Absolutely not, there is nothing wrong with the current practice. — 11%
Approach cautiously. — 42%
Consider strongly. — 36%
Implement as soon as available. — 11%

If there was an economic and reasonable alternative to branding, would you adopt it?

Absolutely not, there is nothing wrong with the current practice. — 15%
Approach cautiously. — 43%
Consider strongly. — 28%
Implement as soon as available. — 14%

If there was an economic and reasonable alternative to dehorning, would you adopt it?

Absolutely not, there is nothing wrong with the current practice. — 8%
Approach cautiously. — 41%
Consider strongly. — 34%
Implement as soon as available. — 17%

public when it comes to the way we raise our livestock.

Here is how producers lose the argument on animal welfare:

X Assuming science will give us all the answers.

Science only gives us some of the answers. I believe strongly in science but science doesn't solve ethical questions. Also, the public does not trust scientists and assumes they can be bought. Watch the news and it is easy to find "scientists" on both sides of almost every issue. It has become a contest of "my science is better than your science."

X Using economics as the justification for all of our practices.

Although it makes sense to those of us who raise animals for a living to say, "Well of course we treat them well or we won't make money," statements like these really hurt our efforts with the public. In other words, if this is all about making money rather than working with animals, we would probably be in another line of work.

We need to convince the public that we truly care about animals, not just about dollars. Besides that, it is not always true. You can have extreme conditions that are not good for animals that can be profitable.

X Assuming that we have to defend all agricultural practices, regardless of what they are.

Why? I believe we defend those that are defensible. Period. Defending all practices makes no sense and causes us to lose credibility with the public.

X Assuming we can't do better at animal welfare.

Agriculture is about evolving practices. Why can't we continue to improve a system that is already good but will continue to change?

X Attacking everyone who disagrees with us in a negative, critical manner.

We get angry very easily, and that generally means we aren't comfortable with what we are doing, so we have to defend at the top of our lungs.

X Not being willing to listen because we are so busy responding.

Assuming that the lunatic fringe is the general public, we spend way too much time focusing on lunatics and not working with the public.

X Being reactive rather than proactive.

X Assuming that because someone disagrees with us he is stupid, evil or both.

Good people can look at the same issue differently.

X Not working hard enough to build coalitions that include the public (consumers).

Most of our coalition efforts are focused on bringing agricultural groups together. There aren't enough of us, and we don't represent enough votes on major political issues.

X Criticizing/mockingly any animal production system that is not "conventional."

There is room in agriculture for lots of different methods of production. Let the market determine their success rather than our hoping for them to fail.

X Trying to lead a parade without seeing if anyone is following.

Have we asked producers about the issue? I have surveyed more than 200 cattlemen in three locations, and more than 90% of them say, "Animals have the RIGHT to be treated humanely and ethically."

To see how cattlemen surveyed feel about animal welfare, see the questions and results of the survey on the previous page. **HW**

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— Dave Daley