

A Standard Comes Before Public Consensus



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It is extremely easy to be lulled into complacency when it comes to animal welfare issues. After all, for most of us, there does not appear to be an immediate or detectable threat challenging the way we are currently doing things.

The market has been exceptionally good. Bull sales are setting record tops, and the U.S. consumer is purchasing our product at record meat case prices. So should we really be concerned about something that does not appear to be an imminent threat?

Being proactive tends to lend itself to those things we understand and have knowledge of or things that have urgent priority such as taking pictures for the sale catalog that has a print deadline next month or synchronizing females for breeding season this spring. However, I am hopeful that we, as an organization, might consider a proactive stand by defining a standard when it comes to the way we conduct our day-to-day business of animal care. If we don't, there will certainly be those who will define it for us.

In our minds caring for the well-being of livestock is a given; it's a part of our DNA, and our livelihoods are dependent on it. Since the first domestication of livestock and the biblical pronouncement of God-given dominion over food animals to man, unnecessary cruelty to animals has, for the most part, been strictly

forbidden. However, standards for cruelty are very different depending on where society is as it relates to the sensitivity of cruelty. In other words, cruelty is and always has been measured on an ethics gradient.

Animal care and welfare laws were some of the earliest laws of human culture. As part of the law, ancient Hebrews were required to relieve an animal of its burden even if they did not like its owner, did not know its owner or even found that it was ownerless.

The ancient law required a farmer to send away a mother hen before taking her eggs. Ancient farmers and ranchers were not even permitted to purchase an animal unless they had made provisions to feed that animal first. In fact, they were expected to feed their animals even before they fed themselves, but, of course, that was before the microwave oven or the ballpark frank at the local gas station. Most of this sounds like common sense to us. There is a moral fiber that we all are a part of that tells us the difference between right and wrong when it comes to animal welfare.

The emancipation of slavery after the civil war escalated further the standard of welfare as it relates to human rights and well-being. Today, there are those who wish to bestow those same human rights upon

animals. The humanization of animals has become a very real and dangerous philosophical battle between those of us with agrarian values and those from urban backgrounds with no understanding of the food chain.

The Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS), the richly resourced "animal advocate" group, is currently lobbying states for defined "rights" and new rules for animal care. These go beyond puppy mills and dog fighting. In Missouri alone, HSUS has two full-time lobbyists in Jefferson City.

Bernie Rollins, leading scientist on animal ethics from Colorado State University, says that when it comes to ethics, consensus rules as it relates to rightness or wrongness, and when a public consensus of ethic principles is formed, then new laws are written.

The most recent and hotly debated universal healthcare law is a great example of what can happen when there is enough political capital and public consensus regarding an issue for which many have strong convictions. Momentum is gathered through massive financial resources that can influence public perception, and finally new laws are written and passed even without the full understanding of the consequences.

Animal management practices have come under the same level of public

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scrutiny that the healthcare system fell under, and we have seen firsthand where a radical change in law can be instituted overnight.

In Ohio, HSUS has been very aggressive in petitioning lawmakers and the public on their position regarding the treatment of animals. The Ohio Department of Agriculture has organized the Ohio Livestock Care Standards Board, made up of producers, animal scientists and trade organization representatives, whose

sole purpose is to get ahead of HSUS in defining what is right when it comes to food animal handling and care.

Most of this board's proposed recommendations are very practical, while some may be outside the norm or have regional bias. Nonetheless, members are making a noble attempt to define practices that are manageable and deemed publicly acceptable so that more extreme measures proposed by HSUS's lobbyists might be defeated.

In the next *Hereford World*, we will take a look at what the Ohio Livestock Care Standards Board is proposing, and we will ask a few Hereford breeders their thoughts on the proposed written management practices. Defining what we do on a day-to-day basis may be the best tool for educating the public and defending our industry. **HW**