

Hereford Breeders Respond to HSUS



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When you hear the words factory farming, what does that mean to you? If you were to define traditional beef cattle management practices, would any of those practices cause stress or cruelty to an animal? For those of us who have grown up on beef cattle farms and ranches, we acknowledge that some of our practices inevitably induce stress, but none of the things we do are perceived by us as cruel or unusual treatment to livestock. After all, Dad and Granddad taught us that this was the way it is supposed to be done, but to others there are far different perceptions.

Political pressure built from “full-court-press” lobbying, massive promotion and campaign contributions to legislative activists, and media blitzes is influencing a growing number of public sympathizers as it relates to humane handling. This movement is coming from a deep-pocketed organization that can and does influence the opinions of government-thought leaders. That’s been the recipe of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS).

During the last decade, HSUS, the world’s largest animal advocacy group with reported assets of \$160 million, has influenced agriculture legislation across the country. It is not just about dog and cat shelters as HSUS television commercials would have you believe. The organization has influenced legislators

by convincing them that certain common animal handling and management practices are inhumane. The ultimate goal of HSUS is to eliminate or at least reduce the consumption of meat and other animal-based foods and products.

Wayne Pacelle, HSUS CEO, openly announces his intentions from his HSUS blog. “The HSUS promotes eating with conscience and embracing the three Rs — reducing the consumption of meat and other animal-based foods; refining the diet by avoiding products from the worst production systems (e.g., switching to cage-free eggs); and replacing meat and other animal-based foods in the diet with plant-based foods.”

Pacelle goes on to write, “The HSUS is a big tent organization, and we support people who want to switch to more humanely raised animal products, reduce the amount of meat in their diets, or try a vegetarian lifestyle — but the reduction of meat consumption is one of the best things we can do for the planet given how unsustainable the current levels of factory farming are.”

The HSUS’s underlying mission is where the battle will be fought. The perfect example of this is the dramatic negative impact upon the equine industry that the U.S. horse slaughter ban has had.

Our challenge as beef producers and Hereford breeders is to define,

scientifically justify and articulate our common management practices in an effort to get ahead of the HSUS machine. A sound defense of our management practices with creative promotion in an aggressive, carefully crafted and understandable way may, at a minimum, cause those that are not in the know to question restrictive regulations that could force us out of business. This is not an appealing or interesting conversation, but it is a fact of life that threatens the very core of our business.

Since 2002 HSUS has taken credit for major legislative and corporate initiatives including:

- 2002 – Florida phases out metal gestation crates for swine.
- 2007 – Oregon bans gestation crates for breeding pigs.
- 2007 – Horse slaughter plants in Texas and Illinois forced to close.
- 2008 – Colorado phases out gestation crates and veal crates.
- 2008 – California passes the Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act, defining pen space requirements for veal calves, laying hens and swine gestation crates.
- 2009 – Proposed federal ban on horse slaughter and the sale of horse meat.
- 2009 – California bans the practice of tail docking dairy cattle.

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- 2009 – Wendy's agrees to start purchasing a modest but more meaningful portion of eggs from cage-free producers.
- 2009 – HSUS pressures McDonald's to go to cage-free eggs, mirroring the McDonald's European practices.
- 2010 – McDonald's board opposes cage-free eggs for the U.S. despite pressure.
- 2010 – Ohio Farm Bureau compromises with Ohioans for Humane Farms in order to remove extreme animal handling legislation from the ballot. Ohio Livestock Care Standards Board is formed.

Ohio Livestock Care Standards Board

Some say Ohio agrarians wisely negotiated a truce with HSUS in 2010. In order to get harmful legislation off the ballots and cool down the HSUS promotion machine, Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, along with the Ohio Department of Ag, adopted the Ohio Livestock Care Standards Board (OLCSB) in order to have a place at the table to define humane standards for livestock management.

I have asked several Hereford breeders their opinions of the various proposed guidelines for purposes of stimulating further dialog with the American Hereford Association (AHA) membership.

Question 1— How concerned are you about the animal welfare/handling issue, and do you think there is a real threat to our business?

AHA President John Woolfolk, Columbia, Tenn.: In my opinion, there are several organizations and groups that would like nothing better than to see animal agriculture disappear from the American countryside. These organizations are extremely well funded and are very creative in developing advertising campaigns that reach the hearts and pocketbooks of the American people. In order to keep the animal industry viable, farmers and ranchers will have to take a hard look at how we are viewed by the general public in regard to the welfare of the animals that we raise.

John Dudley, Comanche, Texas:

I am very concerned about the animal welfare/handling issue. There is a difference between the humane treatment and care of animals and humanizing animals. This is a slippery slope that can seriously impact our ability to raise food and fiber for this nation and the world beyond. To a great degree, much of the animal rights movement is a front for radical action and thought that is aimed at putting animal production agriculture out of business. It also targets private ownership of land and private enterprise.

Montie Soules, Skiatook, Okla.:

This movement is not going away, and we must be proactive. HSUS has a strong voice and is very influential with the public. The purebred industry is a portion of the beef industry that is seen in the public at various stock show events around the country. Because of our industry visibility, the Hereford breed could develop and communicate a standard of care that would boost the image of our industry and our product including Certified Hereford Beef (CHB). Defining a standard could even improve the demand for CHB because of a proactive approach to an animal welfare message. We must communicate our concern and care for our cattle and couple that message with the Hereford breed's unique trait of docile disposition.

Question 2 — Do you agree with the OLCSB recommendation that newborn calves must be offered colostrum, or colostrum replacement, within the first 24 hours of their lives?

Woolfolk: Maybe I am missing something here, but I thought that we were already doing that. I thought that even the dairies allowed calves to nurse their mothers for the first day before moving them to milk replacer from a bottle. Any type of supplemental colostrum would certainly be impractical with normal beef production.

Dudley: The recommendation indicates an obvious lack of understanding regarding the range environment that most cattle are raised in. This standard is unrealistic for most operations that allow cattle to be cattle and calve outside in the natural elements with the instinct and expectation to take care of their own calves.

Soules: Assuring that a newborn receives colostrum the first 24 hours is really something that many operators may not be able to achieve. I think the operator has the knowledge to keep the baby calves alive with or without colostrum. It is to the operator's benefit to have a live, healthy calf, but it is the cow's responsibility to take care of that part. There are times at our ranch when we have to step in and assist, and we do, but I'm not sure it should be a standard.

Question 3 — What is your opinion of the following statement: Pain management must be used for purposes of dehorning and castration based on the age and weight of the animal, the methods used, environmental condition, available facilities and human and animal safety. The practice of horn removal or disbudding prior to eruption of the horn growth is permissible without pain management.

Woolfolk: Pain management is the area that is of most concern to me as it relates to livestock management practices. I foresee a growing opinion from the nonfarm sector that believes practices such as dehorning and castration should not be done without anesthesia. Currently, requiring anesthesia will also require a veterinarian perform these procedures and that brings about other concerns. We have a shortage of food animal vets in many areas of the country today. Adding this service to their current workload would only magnify the difficulty that farmers and ranchers have in obtaining veterinary

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assistance in a timely manner. Even though it is of little concern to those pushing so hard for reformed animal welfare, it would be a direct increase in cost of meat production.

Dudley: Most producers make every effort to accomplish dehorning and castration as early as possible. Better for the animal and better for the bottom line. However, there are certain proposed standards that simply are not feasible in the real world.

Soules: Proper dehorning of cattle is a battle area that is going to be difficult to win unless we commit to managing horns at an

earlier age. We know the stress this puts animals through as they get older. There will likely come a time where an animal will have to be treated for pain management once it reaches a certain age.

Should the AHA get involved?

It's worth mentioning that the handful of prescribed standards discussed were written by thoughtful beef industry producers and agriculture professionals in the state of Ohio, yet we do not agree with every aspect of the proposed standards. In fact some are viewed as impractical. These concerns highlight the challenges that are ahead.

According to Dudley, it may be time we engage in the process as a Hereford breed:

“It is vitally and critically important that animal agriculture producers are involved in the dialogue and rule-making process from the start. This is not going away, and we must confront head on these issues that are being raised. It really becomes our responsibility to educate the public and have them understand that proper care and handling of livestock has always been a core belief of those engaged in animal husbandry.”

Amen to that! **HW**