

# Animal Welfare Isn't a Dirty Word

by *Dave Sjeklocha, DVM*

What does animal welfare mean to you? Oftentimes, the phrase “animal welfare” gets taken to the extreme and is confused with animal rights. In fact, blurring the distinction between animal welfare and animal rights is an aspiration of some organizations. In a nutshell, animal welfare supports the use of animals for food, clothing, entertainment and experimentation, as long as humane practices are followed. Animal rights does not support those uses of animals, even if humane guidelines are followed. The debate centers on how one may define the term “humane.”

If there is a common consequence to poor animal welfare, it would be stress. All animals are exposed to stress, even wild animals. By virtue of this, we can look at our operations and identify those practices that stress our cattle, and work to eliminate or reduce those stresses. Some of the more obvious practices would include painful procedures, weaning (for both calves and cows) and cattle handling.

My all-time favorite football coach, Bill Snyder, developed a fairly well-known list he called “Wildcat 16 Goals for Success.” I’m sure most successful coaches have similar lists. Many have taken Coach Snyder’s list and adopted it for their own purposes. There are two goals on that list that can be applied in nearly any environment. Goal #4 is “Improve — everyday...as a player, person and student.” And Goal #6 is “Self-Discipline — Do it right and don’t accept less.” Let’s apply these to animal welfare:

**Improve — Everyday...as a caregiver, person and student of animal welfare.** Occasionally, when I bring up the subject of animal welfare to my clients, I am asked something along the lines of,

“Do you think I’m abusing my animals, Doc?” To which I respond, “No, but do you think there is any way your animal welfare can improve?” Looking for the low-hanging fruit can often yield very positive results.

Weaning, for example, is a very high-stress situation for calves and cows alike. As we scrutinize the weaning process, look for opportunities to improve on the stress levels of calves. Each farm or ranch will most likely have its own unique opportunities. Is the weaning pen wet or muddy? Perhaps drainage could be improved, a mound could be built or bedding could be provided to facilitate a dry place for the calves to rest. Are there weaning techniques to reduce the stress of separation? Fenceline weaning has been shown to reduce weaning stress<sup>1</sup>. Some producers have also implemented a preweaning separation program in which, a couple of weeks prior to the actual weaning date, the calves and cows are separated from each other for one or two days and then allowed to pair up again. This allows the cattle to accept separation more readily when true weaning occurs.

Beyond this example, the larger point is to evaluate your current procedures, whether it be weaning, marketing, pain management, etc., and ask yourself, “Is there any way I can improve on this?”

## **Self-Discipline — Care for your cattle right and don’t accept less.**

One of the great benefits of being a cattle producer is the camaraderie and cooperation with neighbors and fellow cattle producers. I was fortunate to work in areas where ranching families helped each other vaccinate and brand their calves in the spring, prior to turning out to grass for the summer.

Years ago, I had a client and good friend who had taken over the management of a ranch, and when the spring herd work began, the neighbors came over to help. As they put the cows through the chute for vaccinations, my friend saw the neighbor putting cattle in the tub and overflowing it. As a result, the electric prod was being overused. My friend went to the neighbor and offered some advice on how to correct the situation. The neighbor, who was considerably older than my friend, responded by saying, “I’ve been doing this for longer than you’ve been alive, Sonny.” My friend shot back, “Well, you’ve been doing it wrong for longer than I’ve been alive, then!”

It caused some hard feelings, but they got over it. The tub was filled correctly from then on and electric prod use was virtually non-existent. My friend set a standard and refused to back down.

Once you have determined there are common practices to improve, it is vitally important to have the discipline to follow through on those improvements — and not accept less. Initially, it may cause some angst amongst friends, coworkers and even family, but the key is to stick with these “new ideas” and make them become old habits.

## **Animal Welfare is not a “dirty word.”**

Again, please don’t confuse animal welfare with animal rights. These two phrases have completely different meanings with completely different goals. One of the keys to success in any field is to constantly look for ways to improve. Animal welfare should be no different. As you consider your cattle practices and procedures, make a habit of asking, “Is this the best I can do?” **HW**

**Editor’s note:** Dave Sjeklocha, DVM, is a technical services veterinarian for Merck Animal Health.

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<sup>1</sup> Price EO, Harris JE, Borgwardt RE, et al. Fenceline contact of beef calves with their dams at weaning reduces the negative effects of separation on behavior and growth rate. *J Anim Sci* 2003. 81:116–121.