

What ag must understand

By **BERNARD E. ROLLIN***

ONE of the first principles one learns in athletics is to know one's opponent. Every football team watches footage of their upcoming adversaries; every boxer studies videos of potential opponents to learn, in an anticipatory way, their weaknesses and strengths.

If an athlete or team did not so prepare, we would seriously question not only their ability but also their desire to win.

As for burgeoning societal issues regarding animal welfare, the animal agriculture community has behaved like the foolish athlete in a manner disdainful of its adversaries. Instead of fully understanding what is arrayed against it, it is satisfied with simply dismissing the opposition or stereotyping and lampooning them in ways that fall far short of the mark.

In this article, I will discuss the main areas where the agricultural community has egregiously misunderstood social concerns with farm animal welfare.

- The wellspring of societal concern about the treatment of animals in agriculture comes from vegetarian activist extremists who are out to destroy the consumption of animal products.

The wrongness of this position is obvious when one looks at Proposition 2 in California. The proposition passed with 67% of the vote. No one can say the majority of people who voted for it are vegans or vegetarians. Plainly, they are people who consume animal products but are concerned about how those products are produced.

They are no more out to destroy animal agriculture than the people who worry about steroid use in baseball are out to destroy baseball. Rather, they are sufficiently concerned about how animals are raised that they voiced their concern even in the face of threats that food prices would go up.

People will not even give up meat, milk and eggs when told to do so by their physicians based on claims that their health is at risk, so they certainly won't do so because some vegans tell them to.

The best articulation of this — what should be an obvious point — came when I was lecturing at the King Ranch. After I made the point that it is society in general

agriculture must attend to, not the activists, a foreman of the ranch remarked, "Of course it's not just the activists, Doc. If it were, we could shoot the sons-of-bitches."

Certainly, activists do attempt to sway public opinion in favor of their agenda, but they do so by appealing to concerns already there in the general public. And surely, while they hope that more people will become vegan, the chance of moving large numbers of people to radically change eating habits is vanishingly small.

People in society wish to feel that the animals they consume have led decent lives under conditions of good husbandry, and the industry knows this, or else why would Perdue poultry run ads for 15 years showing chickens in a barnyard while the voiceover intones "At Perdue, we raise happy chickens." Similarly, recall the California "happy cows on pasture" ads. Being caught in falsehoods is a sure way to lose credibility.

- The industry grossly misunderstands the concept of animal welfare.

During an early meeting of the Pew Commission on which I served, we devoted a couple of days to hearing from the meat industries.

A woman representing pork producers stood up and announced that the industry was "nervous" about the Pew Commission but would be reassured if everything we said was based on "sound science."

I responded, "Ma'am, if the commission was asking how to raise pigs in small crates, we would consult science regarding feed, light cycles, etc., but we are not asking that. Rather, we are asking, 'Ought we raise pigs in small crates?' (It's) a moral question, and one that science can't answer."

Her reply of "huh?" assured me that she missed my point.

Questions about animal welfare are questions that have a core of ethics. When we ask about the welfare of, say, a pig, part of what we are asking is the ethical question of what people who raise pigs owe the animals and to what extent. Certainly, science is relevant here — for example, to explain natural pig behavior — but what behavior we allow the pig to express in our systems is a matter of ethics.

Whose ethics? The animal industries have historically said animal welfare is defined and assured by productivity. In other words, all that is owed to animals is what is essential to keeping them productive, i.e., basics like food and water.

That would mean, by the industry's definition, that sow stalls provide adequate welfare, but clearly, society demands more, as Prop 2 and other laws eliminating sow stalls attest to, as do countless surveys. So, society does not accept sow confinement or battery cages

or veal crates as providing good welfare. Social ethics have the last word.

As I explained in my keynote speech to the American Society of Animal Science, later published in the *Journal of Animal Science* (2004), society wishes to see pain, distress and suffering minimized and natural behavioral needs respected.

- The industry refuses to act until legislatively forced to do so.

A friend of mine in the industry has remarked to me that the industry sees negotiation as capitulation. Nothing could be more off the mark.

As Colorado agriculture showed when I brokered an agreement between it and the Humane Society of the United States in 2008 to avoid a Prop 2-type referendum in Colorado, successful negotiation gains something for both sides.

In the case of Colorado, joint legislation was passed banning sow stalls and veal crates in the state, but the activist group did not go after battery cages as it did in California, being responsive to the argument that it would have put Colorado's single major but small egg producer out of business. Had it gone to referendum, battery cages certainly would have been included.

Also, when something becomes law, there is generally no wiggle room or leeway in what must be done. Plus, we saved the \$10 million it would have cost to fight the referendum and lose two to one. Now, the industry can negotiate changes in accord with its own time table, and agriculture got positive public relations.

In the wake of all of the evidence indicating public willingness to legislate farm animal welfare, the industry behaves like a kamikaze when it turns a blind eye to negotiation.

- The industry regularly touts the mantra that Americans have safe, inexpensive, plentiful food.

This is not relevant. The public also wants good animal welfare.

- One additional mantra: "We have to show folks where their food comes from."

Doing this is hardly likely to make consumers more congenial to the industry given issues of animal welfare, environment and food safety identified with confinement operations. Indeed, taking a Manhattan, N.Y., housewife on a tour of a confinement pig operation and a slaughterhouse is likelier to make her a vegetarian than anything activists say.

In summary, if the industry wishes to preserve its freedom as much as possible, it should respond to societal ethical concerns, not continue to misunderstand, ridicule and/or ignore them. ■

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