

What has happened?

How farmers, the first stewards of land and cattle, became the target of animal rights activists.

— by Candace Croney, Brenda Coe, Janice Siegford, and Derek Haley —

FOR most of you in the dairy industry, public concern about animals may seem to be a fairly recent development and a new, growing challenge. In reality, these movements have a long history in both the United Kingdom and here in the United States. As early as 1641, the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony voted to print their first legal code, "The Body of Liberties," compiled by Nathaniel Ward which contained cautions against exercising "any Tyranny or Crueltie towards any brute Creature which are usuallie kept for man's use."

The first U.S. anti-cruelty law enacted in New York State in 1828 followed the development of the first SPCA in Britain in 1824 which subsequently became the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). Legislation in Massachusetts followed in 1835 and in Connecticut and Wisconsin in 1838. Other states followed slowly thereafter.

Early animal protection efforts first focused on dogs and horses. Cats, trapping, rabbit coursing, hunting, and farm animal suffering were taken on later. Legislation generally defined an offense as treating an animal cruelly, often citing examples of ill-treatment such as beating, kicking, overloading, or terrifying. Offenses typically also included acts of neglect, such as failure to supply food and water, or veterinary attention to ill animals.

Farm level attention . . .

Public concern (initially in Europe) about how intensively raised farm animals were treated was renewed following the publication of Ruth Harrison's "Animal Machines — The New Factory Farming Industry" in 1964. Harrison was especially critical of newer intensive animal housing systems that seemed to restrict the natural behavior of animals. This book prompted the British government to appoint a formal commission, the Brambell Committee, to examine and report on the welfare of farm animals. The committee set forth "Five Freedoms" that they concluded were basic needs of animals in any farming system. These were: (1) freedom from hunger and thirst; (2) freedom from physical and thermal discomfort; (3) freedom from pain, injury, and disease; (4) freedom to express normal behavior; and (5) freedom from fear and distress.

Although the Brambell commission recommendations did not have regulatory impact, they caused many to reflect about farming systems across Europe and in the United States. These original "freedoms" form the basis for many of today's animal welfare guidelines.

The situation today . . .

The spotlight on animal welfare in the United States has intensified over the past two decades for several reasons, according to Colorado State

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philosopher Bernard Rollin and political scientist and University of Florida communications expert Wes Jamison. They cite four primary reasons, including a common one, the urbanization of American society. Beyond that, the proliferation of philosophers writing about animal rights and extensive media coverage of animal issues have made consumers more aware of farm animal issues. Finally, the widespread anthropomorphic representation of animals in humanlike clothes has skewed consumer view of animals. Rollin refers to this as the "Disney Factor."

The limited legal protection for farm animals in the U.S. compared to European Union nations has also been publicly criticized. Currently, there are no federal standards for on-farm handling and care of animals, although two statutes address the humane transport and slaughter of livestock. While all states have anticruelty laws, they

do not always cover farm animals. Recent surveys suggest that most people still support agricultural uses of animals (as do many animal protection groups) and believe that farmers gener-

Smithfield to phase out crates

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PAGE 18 THURSDAY, NOVEMBER

Campaign group attacks dairy industry again

ally treat their animals well, but they also support some government regulation to make sure that happens.

Animal rights groups have also gotten larger, raise more money, and work together more often than in the past. Today, animal protection activists in the U.S. are seeking modifications of (or even to end) many agricultural practices that have long been considered acceptable and necessary. Keeping animals confined and performing painful procedures (such as dehorning) without pain control are high on the agenda of these groups.

A well-publicized example is the recent partnership of the Humane Society of the United States with Farm Sanctuary to get measures aimed at regulating aspects of farm animal production placed on state ballots. Many of these measures have targeted continuous physical confinement of farm animals, such as crates for sows and veal calves, and most have passed by wide margins.

In the wake of these events, several large companies have announced plans to alter their production practices. Early this year, Smithfield Foods announced that it would phase out the use of gestation crates for sows, a decision it called a

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significant financial investment. Maple Leaf Foods Canada soon followed suit, and Marcho Farms, one of the largest producers of veal in the U.S., announced it would phase out the use of stalls for housing veal calves. Most recently, the American Veal Association voted unanimously that the industry should convert to group housing for calves by 2017 in light of public concerns.

In addition to pressure about animal handling and care, producers are also being challenged by the public to be good environmental stewards. The terms "animal welfare" and "environmentally friendly" are both emotionally charged concepts often linked to vague ideas of farming practices

that promote quality of life for animals and healthy environments, but they are also a reflection of people's values. Many consumers picture pasture-based, grazing systems when asked

to describe agriculture that is environmentally sustainable, promotes good animal welfare, or both. On the other hand, in the

mind of the consumer, intensive animal production systems are tightly linked with environmental degradation and poor animal welfare. This perception leads the public to push for other

models of production to address the environmental and animal welfare evils they associate with the "factory farms" of conventional agriculture.

What can you do?

As a dairy producer, you may feel that you are being forced to abandon traditional and seemingly proven practices or risk having technology taken away by consumers who are not knowledgeable about farm animals or, worse yet, animal activists who are ultimately opposed to animal agriculture as a whole. What are your options for demonstrating stewardship to animals and the environment, yet remaining financially successful? Our second article will look into ways to shine a positive light on your farm.

Animal welfare and dairy
In this issue: How we got here
Next issue: What can we do