

# Be open and up front with activists

Farmers have fallen from saints to sinners in the eyes of some with their care of animals and the environment. Here is how we can repair that image.

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

**F**ARMERS and other members of the animal agriculture community often take a defensive attitude to social pressures applied by activist groups. At times, we may disregard concerns related to animal welfare and environmental issues because the organizations that express them with the loudest voices are viewed as irrational or not credible. However, throwing away these concerns can cause us to avoid addressing issues important not only to those loud activists, but to consumers as a whole.

## **They make you angry, but . . .**

Although focusing on the activities of animal activists is appropriate to a point, simply becoming agitated with them is unproductive. We should examine the reasons why these groups continue to appeal to the public, despite the fact that most people consume animal products and generally support farming. It should be noted that many of the most successful groups have become much less outrageous in their communications and tend to alienate fewer people than they have in the past.

Members of the agricultural community should respond with an overall, cohesive message: We need to treat animals humanely, even those used for food. This is an appeal to ethics and one that is very engaging to the average consumer (espe-

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cially the pet owner) who eats animal products but wants to be reassured that farm animals are treated humanely. A similar message can be used to respond to environmental concerns: We need to be environmental stewards to preserve and protect the health of our land for future generations.

Unfortunately, our usual responses focus on food safety, costs, nutrition content, and science. Because these responses don't embrace or directly address the moral concerns of our consumers, they are often ineffective and criticized.

Instead of avoiding or ignoring concerns, we should consider why these concerns are arising, whether they have any basis, and how we can publicize the work we do every day to address the issues. At the farm level, producers need to be honest and convey to the public that they take care of their animals and the environment on a daily basis.

Additionally, producers should understand that the primary aim of most people, including some activists, is not to put them out of business or end animal agriculture. Instead, the goal is to improve the lives of animals used for human purposes, and to protect the environment.

Ultimately, the perspectives of activists and farmers may not be as far apart as they first seem. While you know that promoting quality of life for your cows will improve production and reduce the costs of disease and culling, most farmers also truly care about their animals and do not want to cause them pain or

discomfort. Similarly, many farmers manage waste to preserve their land for future production and to maintain its value but also because they are concerned about protecting the health and safety of their animals, families, and the communities in which they live.

These messages must be clearly stated, reiterated, and reflected in all production practices, and they must be displayed in places that consumers, rather than just industry insiders, are likely to see, such as advertising and product packaging materials. This will serve two purposes: It will reassure the public that producers are genuinely committed to treating their animals and the environment well, and it will help the public to connect with you as a person with values and interests similar to their own.

## **Be transparent and willing to change . . .**

It bears repeating that dairy farmers must be willing to engage in public dialogue about their practices. Pay attention to the public's questions, responses, and reactions. Also, take notice of the arguments put forward by our more vocal critics. Although they may often be exaggerated, they can sometimes reveal certain truths that we may be better off addressing in some way. It is worthwhile to remember that even the most hostile animal rights proponents or environmental activists may identify genuine concerns about animal welfare and the environment that our industry should address.

Transparency is also extremely important. If there are regular animal care practices on your farm that you would not be willing to let somebody from the public see, that should tell you something. If a practice such as feeding pasteurized waste milk to calves is unacceptable to our consumers, we should probably investigate alternatives that might better meet public expectations of the level of care we give to our animals. In business, we often note that the consumer is always right; yet, in farm animal production, we often seem inclined to disregard what our consumers say they want in terms of animal care.

While it can be frustrating to try to produce safe, affordable, nutritious food and simultaneously address the growing list of consumer demands, we should keep in mind that, like all businesses, agribusiness must be respectful of its clients or risk losing them. Attending to con-


sumers' concerns may ward off attempts to dictate our practices. However, we also need to think about how to recover increased costs that may be incurred from practice changes, for instance, by labeling products as “value-added.”

As an industry, we also need to do a better job of sharing information about animal care and environmental management practices. Being proactive about continually improving our standards of animal and environmental care is extremely

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important in managing concerns about animal well-being and environmental stewardship. Some sectors of animal agriculture have done this by voluntarily integrating certain standards of animal care into their quality assurance programs. One example is the National Pork Board's Pork Quality Assurance Plus (PQA Plus). Launched in June of last year, PQA(tm) Plus is a three-year certification program with an audit option. It is designed to meet the needs of various customers including restaurants, food retailers, and consumers by ensuring acceptable standards of both food safety and animal care. The United Egg Producers have a similar program.

One example of being proactive about animal care in the dairy industry comes from Alberta Milk in Canada. The transportation of cull cows was identified as an area that might put the well-being of cattle at risk. Alberta Milk, together with Alberta Farm Animal Care, wrote a guideline called “Humane Handling of Dairy Cattle.” The booklet which Alberta Milk then mailed to every dairy producer in the province outlines their standards for handling and transporting dairy animals, based on the specific reasons why the animal is being culled. Thus, the dairy industry declared its own standards of animal care with respect to transportation.

Educating yourself about today's animal welfare and environmental concerns and identifying ways that you can improve are critical steps to long-term viability. Everyone is capable of self-assessment and self-regulation and doing so demonstrates the professional ethics and level of care that the public is now demanding. Better yet, making necessary changes and openly showing your operation to concerned members of the public alleviates concerns and will head off future ones. 

## **Animal welfare and dairy**

**Last issue: How we got here  
In this issue: What can we do?**

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