

Values Matter - Linking Science and Ethics

Animal welfare issues continue to make headlines. From corporate requirements to legislative initiatives, change is happening on the farm animal welfare front. In many cases there is also a growing divide between livestock producers and the largely urban consumers who buy animal products.

Earl Dotson of Validus Services (an auditing company) noted at the 2007 AFAC Livestock Care Conference, “there is tremendous cultural confusion on the role and function of animals in society; are they pets, meat or part of the family?” Dotson also says, “consumers want safe food, clean environment and good animal care.” Increasingly this means providing assurances that animals are cared for in a manner that falls in line with societal expectations. Society is changing, but at the same time the public still wishes to consume animal products.

The scientific process is often held up as the golden rule for determining what constitutes good animal welfare. However, the scientific definition of animal welfare includes production, health, stress, pain / suffering, and behavioural components. Decisions as to which components should take precedence are value based and will vary between individual researchers, producers and the public.

Dr. Ray Stricklin, University of Maryland, states, “**Science and ethics always overlap. Science deals with what is, while ethics deals with what ought to be. Research can tell us how much space an animal needs to engage in a behaviour, but research does not determine if an animal ought to be**



Earl Dotson

“... We need to express our moral commitment, explain how we care, and then back it up with science.” Charlie Arnot

able to perform the behaviour. Science cannot make the decision as to where we draw the line on what ought to be.”

Recognizing the interplay between science and ethics is vital for understanding the challenges of addressing farm animal welfare issues. “Science alone should not be the basis for dealing with animal welfare,” says Stricklin.

“We need a moral justification for what we are doing in animal agriculture.”

Charlie Arnot, CMA Consulting, believes that values matter. Speaking at a recent Animal Agriculture Alliance conference in the U.S. he suggested, “We are not connecting with consumers when we use scientific answers to ethical questions. We need to express our moral commitment, explain how we care, and then back it up with science.”

It’s also about building trust. Arnot says, “Trust is important to people. They will refuse to do business with companies they do not trust. What are we doing to build confidence, competence and bring influential others to our position, which will build trust?”

Arnot suggests that industry needs to change the dynamics of the discussion. “We should define ourselves in a professional model, and be engaged with stakeholders – including NGO’s – to know what is important to them. Values matter, it’s not just about science.” ■

EXAMPLES OF RECENT ANIMAL WELFARE DEVELOPMENTS

- Wendy’s International will give preferential treatment to pork suppliers that don’t use gestation stalls and broiler suppliers that use controlled atmosphere stunning
- Burger King shifts policy on animals - going crate / cage free and encouraging the use of gas stunning in poultry
- University of British Columbia considering options for offering ‘cage-free’ eggs within its menu selection
- University of Guelph offers choice of ‘cage-free’ eggs on its cafeteria menu
- Arizona Proposition 204 passes – nearly 62% of voters in favour of banning gestation stalls and veal crates by 2012
- Legislative pressure to ban horse slaughter in the U.S.
- New EU Transport Regulations in force January 2007
- Multiple U.S. State actions to ban foie gras production and sale
- Animal Welfare Institute launches ‘Animal Welfare Approved’ label, in addition to others on the market