

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Farming is a difficult business made even more difficult by the growing list of do's and don'ts handed to farmers by a lot of governmental agencies.

Don't pollute the air, don't pollute the water, don't pollute the soil, don't make noise; don't make dust; and don't smell up the neighborhood with your pig farms and chicken houses. And when you're through filling out all of the forms required by a dozen different agencies, you may have a little time left for farming.

Farmers are berated by environmentalists, conservationists, and those who want them to feed a hungry world. They're lambasted by consumers because of high food prices and from health nuts because of the chemicals they must use to produce cheap food. And now, another problem.

There seems to be a growing concern over what some folks are calling "animal rights." In fact, some Washington observers are saying that animal rights may be the next big

agricultural issue.

Animal welfare advocates are objecting to the way modern agriculture takes care of its animals, suggesting that confinement and overcrowding are causing abnormal behavior, distress and physical disorders. And they're condemning farmers and agricultural researchers for such "inhumane practices" as routine drug use, feeding livestock on concrete slatted floors, using souped-up rations for beef cattle, even castration of male animals.

How far some of this will go remains to be seen, but the Institute for the Study of Animal Protection insists farm animals have some basic rights.

Those rights include the right to stand up comfortably, lie down, turn around, stretch, and groom or preen.

Michael Fox, the director of that organization, says factory farming needs to readdress itself in terms of animal welfare. He says he thinks farmers and

researchers have gone too far with confinement practices, and that productivity should not be the sole criterion for animal welfare.

He says there is already sufficient evidence to show that farm animals well being is not generally considered when efficiency of production is the only measure.

He insists his organization does not want to go back to the old days of farm animals roaming green pastures and living to ripe old ages. But he and some other animal welfarists do feel farm animals confinement has gone too far.

Well maybe it has, but consumers are going to have to make a judgment about how comfortable and well cared for they want their food animals to be, and at what price. Because today's food prices reflect efficiency of production, and confinement feeding means more animals per farm and per farm worker, greater efficiency per pound of feed consumed and much shorter feeding periods. And all of that is reflected in the price of our meat at the supermarket.

The old ways of a backyard poultry flock, a sow and her pigs out behind the barn, and a couple of steers roaming the pasture just won't make it in today's society. There was a time many generations ago when Americans ate beef animals that were three or four years old.

It was common practice for a beef animal to weigh 2000 pounds when it went to market and to be so tough you had to boil it before it

could be eaten. There was also a time when the only chickens that people ate were stewed because they were too old and tough to eat any other way.

Yes, Americans are going to have to decide whether they want happy, contented animals frolicking in green pastures and enjoying the good agricultural life, or whether we will continue to confine food animals into minimal spaces for maximum efficiency.

A chicken in a cage may not be as happy as one roaming the barnyard searching for worms. On the other hand, it might be more happy, considering that its food supply and plenty of fresh water is right at hand

and it doesn't have to fight with other animals and worry about being run over by a tractor. And, when you think about it, who's to say what is happiness to a chicken?

Agricultural researchers maintain that confinement methods actually provide better health control and more frequent observation, more timely disease treatment, and a lower mortality rate. So, crowded conditions aren't the only measure of animal welfare.

How far the animal rights battle is going to go may depend on who is pushing the cause and what kind of reception it gets.

I think most people agree that animals have the right

to humane treatment, but that doesn't mean they deserve the same rights and privileges as people.

After all, we're talking about food animals—that after whatever period of feeding are going to be slaughtered and eaten by people—and that may be the ultimate act of inhumanity.





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