

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Looking ahead

Farmers face some interesting times ahead resulting from a variety of pressures and concerns created by the animal rights folks, the environmentalists, the land planners, the policymakers in Washington, and some other people.

It's hard enough trying to earn a living on the farm without some of these other problems. Just the day-to-day struggle with crop and livestock production and marketing and the ever-present cost-price squeeze is enough to wear farmers down. But now they have new concerns — problems they probably hadn't even thought about five years ago.

At the top of the list for those farmers who raise livestock is animal rights — not just animals welfare, but rights. There's a national movement headed by what one observer calls "bleeding heart liberals looking for a cause."

It's bad enough that these animal rights folks don't understand farming, but most of them seem to be vegetarians. They

don't eat meat and they seem to want to spread that philosophy — going as far as making little school kids feel bad because they ate Porky Pig for breakfast.

Some of these groups are so off the wall that sensible farmers dismiss them as kooks. But it's not that easy. They're holding meetings, briefings and press conferences. They're talking to lawmakers and bureaucrats.

In this great land of the free and the brave, you can champion just about any cause you want. In this instance, it just happens to be animal rights. And while they're asking farmers to take better care of their animals, I find myself wondering if that's really what they want. If, as reported, they are raising the consciousness of children toward animal rights by asking them how many farm animals have to die so they can eat, then I start to question their motives.

If their cause is to stop the slaughter of farm animals, then why don't they say so and stop

masking their thrust with talk about how many square feet of space should be allocated to a laying hen and how a veal calf is fed.

If a bill of animal rights is to include the right to life, then the entire livestock industry is up for question. In fact, the way most of us get our nourishment is suspect.

So the animal rights issue goes way beyond the farm gate and involves a lot more than just farmers. Any of us who eat meat may have a stake in what these folks are able to accomplish. And maybe we should smoke out in the early stage the animal rightists' agenda.

I have no quarrel with a fellow who prefers granola to beef steak. But when he starts boring me with how unhealthy my meal is, I start to get irritated.

There's no question that


livestock producers need to head off potential problems. It would be far better for commodity groups to establish codes of ethics for themselves instead of allowing it to be done for them by the uninformed or by those advocating the right to life for farm animals.

A pretty good argument can be made against some of the animal rights advocates based on misinformation or lack of information. It's pretty hard to ask a chicken how it feels about confinement rearing, least-cost meals, or the rough hands of the catcher. And we're not real sure how they

feel about their purpose in life — to grow and get fat and then become someone's dinner.

But as long as man has dominion over animals and until there is strong reason to the contrary, I can't see serious change in the livestock industry or in consumer's eating habits.

Expect to hear a lot of talk about animal rights over the next few months and hope that those doing the talking understand agriculture and the purpose of livestock production, and aren't in fact out to turn us all into vegetarians.



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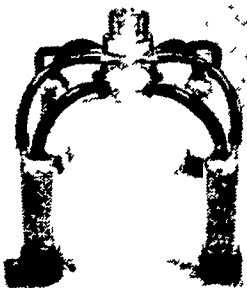
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