

Farm Talk

by
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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 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. 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 that farm animals have some basic rights. They include the right to comfortably stand up, lie down, turn around, stretch, and groom or preen. The institute cites factory farming needs to readdress itself in terms of animal welfare, that farmers and researchers have gone too far with confinement practices, and that productivity should not be the sole criterion for animal welfare.

That organization insists it does not want to go back to the good old days of farm animals roaming green pastures and living to ripe old ages, it says animal welfarists do feel that farm animal confinement has gone too far.

Well maybe it has, but consumers are going to have to make a judgment about how comfortable 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 2,000 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 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.

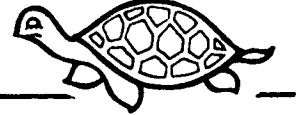
A chicken in a cage may not be as happy as one roaming the barnyard searching for worms. On the other hand, it could be happier considering that its food and plenty of fresh water are right at hand and it doesn't have to fight with other animals or worry about being run over by a tractor.

Agricultural researchers maintain that confinement methods actually provide better healthy 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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