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Balancing the requirements of the society, pig, and producer

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Introduction

Taking proper care of one's animals has always been understood as an ethical responsibility. It is a responsibility that has traditionally been accepted by producers, and largely taken for granted by the general public. In the past, producers never thought of the ethical responsibility to care for their animals as being in any sort of conflict with good business practice, and the public never thought much about the welfare of farm animals at all. I do not think that we should think that consumers in the past did not care about the welfare of farm animals. Rather, I think that people who reflected on the well-being of livestock tended to think that farm animals were living lives well suited to the kind of creatures that they are, and that the producer's self interest in healthy animals served as a check against cruel treatment.

Times have changed, however. Some of the changes reflect new attitudes toward animals, but there have also been changes in animal production itself. There is now a significant social movement committed to changing the way that humans use animals. This movement had its roots in protest over the use of laboratory animals, but has now spread to many other areas, including animal agriculture (Rudacille, 2000). Arguably, general public ignorance about agriculture provides an opportunity for such activists to have influence beyond what their numbers would suggest. But while one should not underestimate the importance of public expectations, neither should producers neglect the way that the swine industry now differs from what it was in the past. Some of these differences have important implications for the way that we should understand the ethics of animal husbandry.

The burden of ethical responsibility

The ethical responsibilities of animal husbandry have been thought of as duties that individual people—farmers and farmhands—must perform on behalf of the animals in their care. Any practice that results in ill health or poor treatment of a farm animal has been thought of as a fault for which the lone, individual husbandry man should be held accountable. Although it is still true that husbandry imposes ethical duties on those who practice it, animal agriculture has changed dramatically in scope and complex-

ity over the last few decades. New technologies pose challenges to the way that we understand how animals fare in a given production system. New methods may seem to enhance one dimension of animal health and well-being, while seemingly causing a decline in another. New scales of production can provide opportunities for improvements in overall herd health, reproductive success, and profitability, while reducing the amount of care and attention that can be given to an individual animal. Emerging trends in marketing and contracting constrain producers' flexibility and introduce powerful new actors into decision-making roles that affect animal health and well-being. This means that, although the ethical responsibilities of the individual husbandry man are still important, there is a growing need to examine the ethics of animal care on an industry wide basis (Thompson, 2001).

In a technologically complex world in which a producer's choices are sharply limited, it is no longer appropriate to place the entire burden of ethical responsibility on the shoulders of individual farmers. Above all, consumers must not expect individual farmers to undertake practices that will make them uncompetitive in the marketplace. Livestock producers will do what is necessary to compete, or else they will not be livestock producers for very long. But it is not unreasonable for consumers to expect that the industry as a whole should continue to recognize an ethical responsibility for proper care. This means that the ethics of farm animal welfare must come to be seen as a collective responsibility that falls upon the organizations having the means to influence the care of animals on an industry wide basis. The ethical responsibilities of husbandry must be reflected in industry standards, market structure and government regulation, as well as in individual producers' husbandry of their animals.

We are entering a time when the public's demand for ethical treatment of farm animals is starting to register in the form of price premiums and special contracting requirements, as well as pressure for government action. It is very difficult to measure or characterize what public expectations are at any given time, much less how they will change in the future. Although public opinion research can tell us that more people are expressing concern about the treatment of animals, or that more people are choosing vegetarian diets, a number of plausible interpretations

for such data remain viable at any given time. Thus, for example, it may be that groups with extreme views about animal use are having a significant influence on public expectations. It may also be that public attitudes about appropriate animal use have changed little, but that people are looking for new ways to insure that producer incentives line up with their own understanding of animal ethics. It may also be that diet, health, and the pocketbook are having far greater influence on consumer behavior than anything having to do with animal welfare.

One consequence of the difficulty in sorting out these questions of public attitude is that it will continue to be possible for people to selectively choose whichever interpretation happens to suit their mood. This means that it will be possible for a number of competing claims about public attitudes to be bandied about. Clearly there is a danger that the emerging system will serve neither animal nor human interests well. I believe that the swine industry should not be tempted by interpretations that lay all the blame at the feet of extremists. One problem with such a view is that it can make very reasonable and needed steps seem as if they are concessions. One digs in one's heels and refuses to do the right thing for fear that doing anything will give momentum to a movement seeking unreasonable change. Although I cannot prove it with statistics, my belief is that the mainstream public wants to believe that farm animals lead reasonably contented lives, and that they are prepared to think that farmers want that, too. As such, I think that the most reasonable course of action is to be focused on the pigs themselves, to be resolute in finding industry-wide standards to address any welfare problems that exist, and to let the public reaction take care of itself, to a significant degree.

Establishing ethical goals and principles

One of the key responses has been to rely upon scientific measures of how animals fare under different conditions typical of alternative production methods. This type of work has been undertaken internationally for many years, and the United States is only now starting to take appropriate cognizance of research that has been done in other countries. In 1997, the CAST report on animal well-being acknowledged this work and pointed the way toward a scientifically informed approach to the welfare of livestock in production settings. Last year, three leading animal welfare scientists published an overview paper documenting a number of ways in which existing production conditions throughout North America should be regarded as problematic, given current research (Fraser, Mench, and Millman, 2001). Recently, the Federation of Animal Science Societies has led a process to collect the state of the art in existing scientific knowledge of animal welfare, and to begin thinking about species-based guidelines for farm animal care and use.

Scientifically validated and ethically grounded industry standards can provide an alternative to rules and regulations imposed from without, but only if three key conditions can be met. First, it must be clear that the ethical goals and principles place appropriate weight on the welfare and interests farm animals themselves, at the same time that they recognize the role of animal agriculture in satisfying vital human needs. Second, consumers must have confidence that standards are taken seriously and that livestock producers faithfully follow recommended practices. Third, producers themselves must believe that standards are fairly established and administered. Although some mix of market incentives, government regulation, and self-administered industry standards may eventually emerge to address the new challenges of ethical husbandry, only a system that meets all three of these criteria can truly said to be ethically justified.

Who will take the lead in formulating and implementing such a system? One response has been the US Department of Agriculture's creation of Western Regional Coordinating Committee 204 on animal ethics. This effort to bring together interdisciplinary researchers—including ethicists—is an important first step. But, in fact, there is only so much that a group of professors or government officials can do. Producers themselves should take the initiative, either through existing commodity groups or through some yet-to-be-formed organization that would be one step removed from the day-to-day concern with farm policy and profitability. They will need to work with scientists and government, as well as finding new partners among non-farm groups with an interest in animal care. The eventual organizational response to the new ethics of animal husbandry will probably not look exactly like anything that we have today.

One thing is certain. If producers undertake a new effort to provide assurance that animal interests are being taken into account in contemporary husbandry, they can be sure that people from outside will be watching carefully, even skeptically. Fortunately, there are several well-organized animal protection groups that have a clear commitment to the continuation of animal production for our food supply. Yet any proactive coalition will almost certainly meet opposition from people whose view of animal protection leaves no room for animal agriculture. At present, the broader public is caught between these extremists on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a farm community polarized by extreme views and reluctant to take any coordinated action at all. As Bernard Rollin (1995) has long argued, the new social ethic for animals demands that animal interests be given due consideration in a system that still provides healthy and economical products for consumers. Producers can and should accept the challenge of ending that gridlock, for no one is truly served by it and public confidence in the food system is its greatest casualty.

You may notice that my remarks have focused on “animal agriculture” rather than “pig production.” On the one hand, we must be sensitive to the fact that different species of animal have very different capabilities and very different needs. In addition to this, the various sectors of animal production face somewhat distinct structural and marketing challenges, and these economic realities will certainly affect the nature of any organized effort to affect industry practice. Thus, it will be necessary for pig producers to work together in addressing the needs of their animals, and there will be many specific issues where expertise in the welfare of pigs, as well as the economics of pig production, becomes absolutely critical. On the other hand, there is an important sense in which animal welfare needs to be addressed more broadly. It will be important for the public to see that all animal producers are responsive to the needs of their livestock; hence, there will be a number of policy and procedural issues on which it will be important for each of the species groups to work together.

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Conclusion

As science and technology advance, we have come to expect that standards for husbandry will evolve, and that periodic updating and revision will be the norm. The complex trade-offs between animal welfare, consumer prices, and producer profitability will also be affected by shifting social values and technical change. This points, again, to the need to go beyond the view that ethical responsibilities fall solely on individual producers and animal caregivers. Ethics itself must come to be seen in terms of responsiveness to change and to what we have learned. The ethics of husbandry will consist as much in how the animal industries adapt to new knowledge and altered circumstances as in the individual performance of age-old duties of animal care. This most recent guide to swine care reflects what we have learned most recently about responsible husbandry, but it also represents a commitment to continue in the search for better knowledge and better practice. Producers can meet their responsibility for ethical husbandry only by practicing what we believe to be right today and by resolving to test those beliefs, to learn, and to improve in the future.

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