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Why Animal Welfare & Why Now...The Social Context of Animal Welfare

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While many feel as if animal agriculture has been thrust into the animal welfare debate, the reality is, other segments of animal agriculture have been entrenched in the conversation for years while the dairy industry has, until recently, remained at periphery. The reason for this is due in part to the fact that dairy is an industry not commonly associated by consumers with the death of animals. As a result, until recently the dairy industry has not received a great deal of attention from activist organizations. In spite of the frustration that comes with such criticism, the dairy industry stands to benefit from the experience of other segments of animal agriculture. For every difference between beef, poultry, egg, pork and dairy there are similarities. Developing an effective and defensible approach to animal welfare will require that we not only recognize these similarities and differences, it requires that we understand the history of our relationship with animals, how it has changed and how those changes have affected consumers.

History – For as long as animals have been domesticated there has been social consensus which included an ethic about how animals are treated. The ethic of the early days of agriculture has been described as a “social contract”⁵ between the caretaker and the animals we benefit from. This contract epitomized the essence of good stewardship. As the value of an individual animal far outweighed any benefits gained from poor management or overuse, good stewardship was essential to the success of the farmer.⁵ Prior to WWII, during the great depression, nearly 25% of US income was spent on food and 24% of the population worked in agriculture.⁵

Today’s Environment – Due to the success of preventive veterinary medicine and innovations in agriculture, today we spend a mere 10% of our income on food and the number of people working to produce the food we eat has fallen dramatically leaving only 1.7% of the US population working in agriculture. Together, with the development of a comparatively affluent society, a sense of security with both food and finance was soon realized allowing Americans to become geographically and conceptually removed from the food system. Affluence and food security set the stage a natural expansion of our moral circle. Considerations formerly reserved for those closest/most similar to us were now being given to groups previously ignored or exploited.⁴ Such considerations have been greatly influenced by the changing roles animals play in our lives. Understanding that change and how it affects how we conceptualize animals is key in understanding consumer concerns about animal welfare.

A recent consumer survey¹ revealed that when asked to rate their level of concern on a scale of 1-10, 10 being very concerned, the average response was 8 over concerns about food safety, nutrition, environmental protection, and the treatment of farm animals. While consumers continue to express trust in farmers, they are not sure that what we do today in agriculture is still “farming.”¹ While modern agriculture has focused on efficiency and production, relying on science to prove what can be done, consumer trust has been compromised as they question whether agricultural systems share their core beliefs. Consumers expect us to tend to the welfare of the animals in production systems and we have

moved from a social contract between the farmer and their stock to striving to maintain the **social license** provided by consumers.

The Scope of Animal Welfare – The welfare of dairy cows covers a broad spectrum of concerns rooted in society’s views of the role animals play in our lives. Consumers have become increasingly conscious of animal welfare issues, and they expect that dairy cows and other animals involved in production agriculture are provided for in a way that respects their nature and strives to ensure good welfare. Clearly, consumers expect that abuse or neglect of animals is neither condoned nor permitted. But beyond that obvious expectation, we build and maintain consumer trust by demonstrating that we share a common ethic about animal welfare.

How we define “good welfare” exactly is not as important as understanding what contributes to it. Historically, addressing animal welfare has been limited to concerns over basic health and preventing abuse or neglect. Today it is well established that the scope of animal welfare is much broader, recognizing that the behavioral and emotional needs of animals play integral roles in assuring good welfare. Good welfare is a constant balancing act between all three components: physical, behavioral and emotional health. While one component may receive priority in the short term, the long-term goal is to achieve a reasonable balance. Achieving this balance cannot and will not be done with science alone. While we may be able to answer questions of “Can we?” with science, the question of “**Should we?**” will always be answered in the context of our current social ethic. If we are to maintain our social license to benefit from animals in agriculture it essential that we resolve that farm practices must be congruent with consumer beliefs. Our success will be dependent not only our ability to assure consumers that we are doing the right thing; we must be able to prove it. Equally important, we must be willing to educate and discuss current practices, while much of what we do is defensible, once it is understood, we must be open to recognize were improvements are needed and be open to change and endure the natural discomfort that so often accompanies it. Recognizing that change is required on both sides is the first step in building a more transparent system. As the disconnect between agriculture and the average consumer may be seen today more as a crevasse than a gap, patience and empathy will be key in developing the communication necessary to educate and reconnect our consumers with the systems they depend on.

References

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