

The Future of Beef – Animal Welfare

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Husbandry, as defined in the quick-click Encarta computer dictionary, is the science, skill or art of farming or the frugal and sensible management of resources. Although the term plant husbandry seems somewhat underused, the term animal husbandry was used for years to describe our livestock care efforts. Only in recent times has the term science been stamped into the industry.

Although science was never absent from the field of animal husbandry, some would argue that husbandry is absent from the field of science. Being what it may, animal welfare is a very real topic and certainly needs to be accounted for in the world of beef production.

There is no doubt that practical ranching requires good animal husbandry and good animal husbandry requires good animal welfare. However, those thoughts are only one side of the coin. Times have changed, as David Blandford highlights in “Animal Welfare,” published by the American Agricultural Economics Association’s online Choices magazine (www.choicesmagazine.org, Volume 21, No. 3, 2006). Blandford notes, “Farm animal welfare is an increasingly prominent issue ...” “an issue that is driving change, change at the ranch level as well as change throughout the industry, involving on the ranch management practices, cattle transportation, feedlot management, all the way through to slaughter with the end result of ... increased legislative activity and more buyer requirements for production and marketing practices.”

However, times are changing. One of the greatest impacts is kids. Kids don’t grow up on farms or ranches anymore. Even if they do, they generally are not as integrated into the business of raising livestock. This may not seem to be that big, but it is.

Kids today grow up with a completely different relationship with animals, generally companion animals, not animals utilized for food production. As a result, for current and future generations, as Blandford notes,

“there is substantial confidence in farmers and ranchers in the treatment of animals. However, there appears to be increasing concern about some practices ...”

These concerns easily are multiplied when the base population is removed from the care and management of animals involved in food production. The world is changing. Even though consumer and public attitudes are supportive of farmers and ranches, there are increasing concerns regarding the confinement, intensification or the restriction of natural behaviors of any production practice.

Even newer production efficiency improvements, particularly related to animal breeding and genetic selection impacting reproductive capacity, health or viability, are issues. Subsequently, balancing production costs and welfare issues with consumer responses to managerial changes probably will result in increased costs to the consumer and producer.

In addition, animal welfare standards are worldwide and changes in foreign countries will impact domestic standards. The interplay of regulations will become more complicated. However, the issue is not going away. Blandford notes that “there is increasing acceptance of the Five Freedoms – freedom from hunger and thirst; discomfort; pain, injury, and disease; fear and distress; and any constraints on the ability to express normal behavior – as a basis for developing objective methods for evaluating animal well-being.”

Well, few would argue on principle, but the implication of interpretation is critical. As the old saying goes, read the fine print.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1041 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0331.

Animal Welfare – The Five Freedoms

- **Freedom from hunger and thirst**
- **Freedom from discomfort**
- **Freedom from pain, injury, and disease**
- **Freedom from fear and distress**
- **Freedom from any constraints on the ability to express normal behavior**

Adapted from David Blandford (www.choicesmagazine.org, Volume 21, No. 3, 2006)