

‘Crossroads’ Speaker Explores How Society Views Animals

Californians voted 2 to 1 on Election Day to adopt state Proposition 2, an initiative measure that outlaws contemporary food animal care practices, including use of gestation stalls, veal stalls and layer cages. The effort was led by the Humane Society of the U.S. and Farm Sanctuary, two national animal rights organizations.

The California vote is one indicator that the animal rights groups are winning the battle for the hearts and minds of the typical American consumer, according to Wes Jamison, an expert on how society views animals. Jamison spoke Nov. 6 at the 2008 Ag at the Crossroads Conference..

Jamison holds a B.S. in agricultural science from Auburn University and a Ph.D from Oregon State where he studied agricultural politics. He’s currently working on a second Ph.D from the University of Florida and consultants internationally on interest groups and animal care issues.

Society can’t understand the messages food animal producers are sending about animal care, he said, because “Society listens in a different language.

Animals Viewed Differently

“There has been a tectonic shift in the role of animals in the lives of your consumers,” he said, as evidenced by annual spending of \$70 billion on pets in the U.S.

U.S. society exhibits the four factors that are essential to an animal protection ethic, Jamison said:

- Urbanization – people experience animals as companions.
- Anthropomorphism – people project human qualities onto animals.
- Societal belief in evolution – that people are biologically similar to animals and not that different from them.
- Belief in equality – an urban public that views animals as children expands its idea of who or what has rights.

Animals are the perfect family members, Jamison said, because they supply whatever is lacking in our human relationships. “Your audience (consumers) is more like the animal rightists than us (animal agriculture). The question for consumers is not ‘Why animal rights?’ but rather, ‘Why not animal rights?’”

Jamison cited an Ohio State University study which found that 81 percent of respondents believe farm animals’ well-being is as important as pet well-being. Food animal producers make a mistake when they use economic arguments to respond to consumers’ concerns, he said.

“When people are willing to spend \$7,000 so an aging dachshund can have back surgery, the message that changing livestock housing systems will add two cents to cost-per-pound doesn’t cut it.”

Consumers Are Hypocrites

Consumers need producers’ help to manage the guilt that results from wanting “one animal in the center of their plate and another animal at the center of their life -- consumers are hypocrites,” Jamison said.

Animal agriculture needs to reclaim its legitimacy, he said. “We need to lead with a moral argument – that what we do is morally right.” Food animal producers provide good care to their animals and do the work that consumers don’t or won’t do to have meat on the plate, he said. “We need to give consumers permission to live as hypocrites.”

After the animal rightists’ victory in California, they can be expected to target other states, including Nebraska, he said. The debate over food animal care is a winnable issue, he said, but agriculture needs to inoculate the consumer with information and visuals that explain production practices.

“What you don’t want to do is buy into the animal rightists’ strategy” of getting producers to accept small incremental changes in production practices,” he said. “They’ll increase your costs inch by inch until you lose efficiencies and go out of business.”

###