



Animal Treatment – Public Perception vs. Reality

How many people in this country didn't see the videos or read about the treatment of dairy cows at the Hallmark/Westland meat packing facility in Southern California? My guess is not very many. My guess is, also, that there will be long-term consequences for all of us involved in animal agriculture. Since the videos were of cull Holstein dairy cows, they might have even stronger implications for dairy than for other segments of the animal agriculture industry. The pictures were not pretty, and neither is the inaccurate perception that the pictures create. Too many people are now associating the subsequent recall of the meat with animal cruelty or with impurity of the meat from those animals rather than the real reason: that the facility was not following "downer animal" guidelines.

The implications of this unfortunate incident will go far beyond that meat packing plant. Congressional activity on this issue is currently only in the hearings stage, but could soon reach the point of discussing further regulations for everybody involved in animal agriculture, including dairy farmers. Our partners in the food industry may be asking for increased assurances from us that we are treating our animals humanely.

If we are requested to provide information regarding the management of our cows, it shouldn't be a surprise. Other segments of the livestock industry have already been faced with this issue. Here in Michigan, a company supplying eggs to McDonalds has had to revamp its

laying houses to meet the McDonalds space requirements. The veal industry is being forced to move from individual veal crates to group pens for their animals to meet the demands from their buyers. Florida and Arizona have passed ballot initiatives to disallow farrowing crates. California has collected about twice the number of signatures needed to place on the November ballot an initiative to ban sow gestation crates, veal crates and hen battery cages.

Sounds grim doesn't it? More people minding your business is most likely not something that you welcome. I feel the same way, but maybe we still have time to take action to have more control over our destiny. We all know that we do a pretty darned good job of caring for our animals. If we don't, we are not acting in a humane manner, plus we risk our chances of long term financial opportunity. Cows that are not well cared for don't produce as much milk as those that are. Calves not well cared for don't grow to produce an abundant amount of milk, if they survive to adulthood at all.

We've got the care part right in my opinion, but maybe what we are lacking is explaining that to the public. We tend to forget the fact that most people today have little or no connection to production agriculture. Gone are the days when most every family had a relative still actively involved in production agriculture, or at least one in the previous generation who had been involved. So, how can we expect them to understand the nature of our business?

We could become better communicators. We need to address the issue by becoming involved in writing standards that explain to our customers how we treat our cows. That may sound worrisome because of the fear of serious restrictions on how we conduct our businesses. However, I don't think it has to be that way, especially if we take a proactive approach and address the issue before we are forced to do it by government or industry regulations. The National Dairy Animal Well-Being Initiative that will be finalized this summer addresses this issue very well. When it is finished, we will want to study it and accept it "as is" or make some minor changes that could be specific to our region of the country. In the final analysis, the concept should go a long way in addressing the concerns of our customer.

In the meantime, we should probably be even more cautious about sending possible problem cows to the sale barn. We need to be good stewards. We need to let people know about our practices, preferably not through the use of surveillance cameras that might be recording, even on a dairy farm somewhere, and later end up on YouTube.com. This is a manageable issue, and we must do our part to reach a successful outcome.

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