



Legislating Animal Care

Who cares about animal care? Do you? How about your family, friends and neighbors? Chances are that you all feel pretty strongly about responsible care for animals, whether they are food producing animals or pets. You live in the country because you are a farmer or someone else who enjoys the rural lifestyle. This way of life usually includes a love and respect of nature, both domestic and wild. You also are no doubt aware of House Bills 5127-28 and Senate Bills 654-55 introduced in the State of Michigan legislature, that would dictate how your dairy cattle and all other food producing animals in Michigan should be cared for. Other nearby states are dealing with this issue also; it's not just a Michigan thing. When you first heard this news, your reaction was probably to ask, "Why in the world do we need the government telling us how to treat our livestock?" Equally puzzling to many is why all the agriculture commodity groups in Michigan are favoring this legislation. We do, after all, usually complain bitterly about increased governmental oversight. So why the change in attitude?

While many factions are asking for animal care legislation, I would like to look at it from the perspectives of two of those factions: the farmers who produce the food and the consumers who purchase it. Never in history has the food consumer been so distanced from the food they eat. Today it is rare for consumers to be acquainted with a farmer, much less know what takes place on a modern farm. Lack of familiarity leads to questions when a very rare occurrence of improper animal treatment is cast by some as being routine on

the farms of modern agriculture. Couple this with the fact that never in our history have we had so many people so knowledgeable and so concerned about human nutrition, and you realize that care must be taken to provide positive assurances to the consumer. The proposed legislation is one method of confirming that we are managing our herds in a sound and responsible manner.

Modern agriculture has changed dramatically from that time when consumers were not distanced from growing the food they eat; but perceptions of agriculture for many have not. Many consumers perceive the norm as the red barn with a small herd of cows grazing in a grassy pasture, whether summer or winter. Reality is few red barns, herds that have grown in number, and cows that have a problem finding grass in January. With the exception of no grass in January (a no brainer) we could have and should have done a better job of explaining agricultural practices over the years. Farmers have implemented modern, scientifically proven production practices that are respectful of animals while at the same time increasing efficiency as we continue to provide an affordable food supply that is safe and nutritious. We are now doing a better job of relaying this information to consumers.

A year or two ago, it didn't occur to me that consumers would equate animal care with anything other than humane treatment of livestock. But I think I was wrong, because the more I talk to consumers, the more I realize that they do connect animal care to food safety. The connection may stem from the mistaken idea that modern

agricultural practices lead to more pathogens in the food supply. Whatever the reason, it makes it even more important to support the legislation to address concerns on the part of the consumers.

The standards in the proposed legislation are requirements that dairy farmers can live with, because they aren't unlike our present practices. National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) and Dairy Management Incorporated (DMI) are working together to establish national dairy animal care standards that are science-based and are third party verifiable. Third party verification would be performed by accredited verifiers who have a science-based understanding of animal care. Will we agree with every nuance of the standards? It's very doubtful, as some of the requirements will sound as ridiculous as our current requirement that we need a self-closing bathroom door in our utility room that already has a self-closing door. By and large, though, I think that we can do what is being requested without a high level of anxiety.

Consumers will continue to be concerned about where their food comes from and the production practices used to produce that food. It is important that farmers proactively support efforts such as this legislation to help assure the public that animals are treated in a humane manner and that our food supply is safe.

Additional information on HB 5127-28 and SB 654-55 can be found on page 10 of this issue.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken".