

Helping Industry Ensure Animal Well-Being

Things in the henhouse changed practically overnight when McDonald's announced in 1999 that it would no longer buy eggs from producers who didn't meet its guidelines for care of chickens. Those guidelines included limiting the number of birds that could be kept in one cage and prohibiting beak removal, except for trimming just the tips.

Once McDonald's had led the way in issuing animal care guidelines for the company's suppliers, many other giants of the fast-food industry rapidly followed suit, including Burger King, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, Wendy's, A&W, and KFC. Now, the American Meat Institute has adopted welfare guidelines and audit checklists for cattle, pigs, and chickens. And the European Union, representing our foreign customers, is also weighing in with, among other things, legislation banning prolonged use of crates to house pregnant sows, effective in 2013.

It seems that everybody these days is writing guidelines for animal care. Such guidelines are the basis for animal welfare audits in which farm animal behaviors and conditions can be rated with a checklist to determine whether or not animal welfare standards are optimal.

Questions about animal care arose with the explosive growth in large-scale livestock farms, which spurred customers to complain about animals being treated as "factory parts." That spurred ARS and the livestock industry to take a proactive approach to addressing animal welfare issues, making sure that guidelines are based on facts determined through scientific research. The goal is to share research findings with the retail food industry and others so that the livestock industry can improve its voluntary guidelines.

Ten years ago, to address these concerns, ARS started a research program on livestock behavior and stress. The scientists involved were tasked with finding out whether modern farming practices were unduly stressing animals. And if so, could scientific methods be developed to measure this stress so that practices could be evaluated objectively rather than subjectively?

A decade later, the initial answer is "yes" to both questions. Many had expected the answer to be "no" on both counts, but science works independently of people's opinions.

As the story that begins on page 4 shows, research has proved that practices like trimming off a third to half of a bird's beak or cutting off a dairy cow's tail is too stressful to be condoned. It has shown this with not just one but several objective measures all pointing to the same conclusion: These common practices cause animals lasting pain.

That is unacceptable under the ethics of animal care.

Beyond being the right thing to do, improving animals' welfare can have economic benefits that offset possible higher production costs, through resulting improvements in food safety and quality. That link was discussed at the 2004 meeting of the Animal Agriculture Alliance, a group formed more than 3 years ago by livestock industry representatives.

ARS scientists are finding evidence of links between animal stress, food quality, and food safety. It boils down to the fact that when livestock are unduly stressed, they undergo physiological changes that can increase their chances of catching and spreading diseases. And the quality of their meat may decline, as well.

Another important point raised at the 2004 alliance meeting was the small number of scientists pursuing animal welfare research. ARS's original animal behavioral scientist, the late Julie Morrow-Tesch, organized the first ARS Livestock Behavior research units. She was succeeded by research leader Donald Lay, who was recently joined by two former visiting scientists from Great Britain, Jeremy Marchant-Forde and Ruth Marchant-Forde. Purdue University's Ed Pajor, another member of the team, serves as an advisor on McDonald's Animal Welfare Council.

Other ARS scientists pursuing animal welfare research include immunologist Susan Eicher and neuroscientist Heng-wei Cheng, also on the ARS-Purdue University team. Because there are currently so few scientists pursuing this line of research, ARS has special leadership responsibility to ensure that the findings are provided to industry.

We have to communicate our research so that organizations like the Animal Agriculture Alliance can convey science-based guidelines to the entire industry—from farmers to veterinarians to processors to grocers to retailers. All have to work together and deal with the facts, no matter how those facts square with previous perceptions or predispositions.

When you deal in facts rather than perceptions, you see results because you're operating in the real world. The bottom line, as expressed at the alliance summit is: How can the food industry advance animal welfare, be progressive, and still stay in business?

Sometimes there is no conflict between these goals because a healthy, unstressed animal simply requires less care and expense and may yield more and better meat. We need to provide scientific facts about best production practices so that industry can use them in their new animal-care guidelines—before someone else dictates changes that may or may not be relevant.

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