

Consumer-provider social contract needs updating

By **STANLEY CURTIS***

SIR Winston Churchill said it is “better to take change by the hand than have it take you by the throat.”

The providers — that is, the producers, processors and purveyors — of foods of animal origin now face many such opportunities — and threats — on the farm animal welfare front.

Second in a series

In an earlier article on this topic (*Feedstuffs*, Jan. 28), advisability was extolled for consumers and providers of those foods to deal with one another in ways that honor the ethic of reciprocity and to renew and upgrade the social contract existing between the two groups. The matter was left there, at the point of asking: What might such a new social contract look like?

The answer is: It would all depend. It would all depend upon how such an issue-resolution process is framed; on whom would be parties to the process and on the nature of the parties' respective positions.

The process probably should take the form of mediation, a non-binding exercise facilitated by a professional mediator. That mediator would facilitate the work but would not impose a resolution. A competent mediator would be chosen by all parties to the issue.

On the consumer side of the table should sit organized representatives of unapologetic consumers of foods of animal origin who are seriously concerned about the state of being of agricultural animals. It would make no sense for an animal activist or vegan or vegetarian to pretend to work in good faith in updating a social contract with the providers of the very foods they reject and proselyte and politic against on moral grounds.

On the provider side should sit

qualified representatives of producers, processors and purveyors of the various foods of animal origin for which there is great consumer demand in the U.S. and abroad. All should have demonstrated and professed respect for the state of being of agricultural animals.

All members of both mediation teams should respect both scientifically informed notions of what constitutes animal state of being and the consumers of foods of animal origin who are seriously concerned about agricultural animals.

Mediating representatives of the consuming and providing parties would have to recognize, moreover, that on both sides, there needs to be give and take — to the point of discomfort — if real progress is to be made in their work. That is simply the way it is with the resolution of difficult issues in a democratic and pluralistic society.

All would need the backing of their respective constituencies so that a mediated resolution would have a reasonably good chance of being adopted and followed by all parties.

Discomfort

That “point of discomfort” reality was acknowledged by a live-production manager with a vertically integrated provider of foods of animal origin who recently wrote me to say: “Your challenges make me nervous, but, you know, everybody has to be uncomfortable before any change will happen.

“We shouldn't be concerned about hiring people involved with humane activists. We should be concerned, instead, that we have reason to be worried about what a mole might see in our barns,” the manager added.

Finishing on an upbeat note: “Maybe I can help get us on the path toward transparency on our farms.”

Whoa! Hold on now.

For providers to sit down at a mediation table anytime soon would be to put the proverbial cart ahead of that pony. Before producers, processors and purveyors of foods of animal origin would be in any shape to participate from a position of power and promise in renewing and upgrading their explicit and implicit contracts with

the consuming public, they would have to take some intentional steps to repair the fundamentals of live-animal care and treatment from one end of the provision chain to the other. Recent events emphasize that some revolutionary paradigm shifts are in order.

The torrent of damaging and embarrassing exposés of animal abuse, the inexplicable acquiescing to even the irrational demands of some activists and the virtual inevitability of ramped-up activist pressures on various political fronts in the very near future all call for every party engaged anywhere along the chain of providing foods of animal origin to come together to plan and take concerted, positive action.

Three main thrusts are indicated for immediate attention. Each would be a formidable task for the animal food industry. They include:

(1) Establishing (for the first time) some control over the direction of the farm animal welfare issue — and then to exploit that control — by switching from the disorganized, reactionary approaches to issue management typical of the past and present to organized, proactive ones.

(2) Continuing to improve the care and treatment of farm animals and then to effectively increase across-the-board discipline by redoubling efforts both in husbandry research and the training and oversight of those who care for, handle and transport live animals.

(3) Regaining the public's confidence in farm animal care and treatment and then expanding that confidence by switching from the opacity in operations typical of the past and present to transparency in the care and treatment of animals up and down the line.

Naysayers

The sweeping proactive initiatives outlined above predictably will find their share of naysayers throughout the industry. Contemplated changes usually do. Contemplated revolutionary changes always do.

We must choose alternative, effective routes in managing this issue. The need for changes already is upon us.

Right now, the providers of foods of animal origin should be offering their hands and guarding their throats.

*Dr. Stanley Curtis is a professor with the University of Illinois and is considered one of the nation's leading authorities on animal welfare. The first part of this article appeared in the Jan. 28 issue of *Feedstuffs*.