

Welfare requires transparency, accountability, responsibility

By **STANLEY CURTIS***

“NO virtue is more universally accepted as a test of good character than trustworthiness,” wrote Harry Emerson Fosdick. The maelstrom surrounding the issue of farm animal welfare betrays a breakdown in trustworthiness among those who do business with one another whenever a customer purchases food of animal origin.

In earlier articles (*Feedstuffs*, Jan. 28 and March 10), it was concluded that (1) there now should be an updating of the social contract between the producers, processors and purveyors of those foods and the consumers and customers of those foods, but (2) before that endeavor is begun, animal agriculture should engage in some important paradigm shifts. Now, the need for more transparency — and associated accountability and responsibility — and the part individual animal identification can play in those thrusts will be explored.

Third in a series

Although it is the essence of progress, most businesspeople (at least subconsciously) eschew change. Reasons include fear of the risk of unpredicted consequences, inevitable costs and the turmoil and ensuing economic disincentives that accompany change.

Yet, as animal agriculturists have recognized since the mid-1900s, change sometimes is also the essence of survival, and so change must be embraced by those who intend to survive.

Such is the case now for the entire industry regarding coping with the issue of farm animal welfare. To regain the public's confidence in farm animal care and treatment and then expand that trust, producers, processors and purveyors of foods of animal origin should switch from the opacity in their operations typical of the past and present to a new transparency as to how animals are cared for and treated up and down the line.

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Hackneyed saw

People want to know where their food comes from. For a long time, many thought they knew: “From the supermarket.” They often are either outright surprised or have their latent knowledge jogged when they are told or reminded, as the case may be, that food comes to the supermarket from the farm, usually with an intermediate trek through a processing plant or two.

Whether or not the very notion of a farm is new, virtually every one of our fellow citizens has no idea what a farm looks like or what goes on there, and they are gullible. That is why they are so vulnerable to the mis-informative and dis-informative propaganda about animal farms that has become the stock in trade for prominent farm animal protection organizations.

To counter the disingenuous tactics employed by those activists bent on eliminating the use of animals as food, animal agriculture should unite and mount its own informative campaign. Indeed, it should have done so a couple of decades ago.

Transparency

First, though, animal agriculture will have to become transparent throughout its operations. It will have to open its doors and un-shutter its windows and ostensibly lay down a welcome mat for any citizen, consumer or customer who might want to see first hand where foods of animal origin come from.

Opacity means secrecy. Transparency means open and free from deceit and guile. People distrust secretiveness, but they value openness, especially when it comes to something they are going to put in their mouths and swallow.

Is animal agriculture ready to switch its policy from opacity to transparency? In general, the answer is “no.”

Facilities and operators. For the most part, when contemporary production systems are well designed and operated, they humanely support a high state of being for the animals. However, for a variety of reasons, decision-makers do not always employ well-designed facilities, and on-site managers do not always see to it that existing facilities are operated as they were intended to be. Moreover, those who care for and handle animals are not always humane in the

way they treat their charges.

FOR these reasons, the animals more or less suffer as a result.

Before going transparent, America's farmers and ranchers and their colleagues in the processing and purveying sectors will have to make sure their facilities are appropriate and that staffers know how to operate the facilities and how to supportively treat their charges and then resolutely follow through on what they know.

Manure and housekeeping. Also, manure management and general housekeeping at many farms will have to be improved — not that this necessarily will greatly increase animal state of being, though.

Those who work at animal facilities eventually become habituated and oblivious to the sights and smells typical of such places, but those same perceptions shock most uninitiated visitors, leaving lasting first impressions of an unaesthetic, off-turning sort. Many negative opinions about animal welfare on farms and ranches are actually rooted in such aesthetic reactions and revulsions.

Animal houses and farms do not have to be dirty and odorous. Plenty of examples prove this. The reputation of the entire industry would increase if much more attention were paid to manure management and general housekeeping at animal facilities.

Accountable, responsible

Accountability means being obliged to accept responsibility. Responsibility is a form of trustworthiness. Accountability, responsibility and trustworthiness are good things when it comes to doing any kind of business, and there are ample signs that all of these virtues are on the minds of those engaged in animal agriculture as well as their customers.

Its willingness to go transparent would offer proof of an animal agricultural entity's accountability and responsibility, of its trustworthiness for consumers and customers. Being worthy of such trust would be, after all, the objective of a united animal agriculture's campaign to correctly inform its fellow citizens about the nature of the various producing, processing and purveying systems now doing business as a vital service to the people of the world.

Individual animal ID

The ultimate in trustworthiness would be demonstrated if animal agriculture spearheaded the adoption of individual animal identification (IAID) throughout the industries.

Not only would IAID be an invaluable tool in the epidemiology of disease, which is the major reason the U.S. Department of Agriculture advocates its advent, but it also would provide consumers and customers with absolute evidence of the acceptance of complete accountability and responsibility by producers, processors and purveyors.

In one fell swoop, this paradigm shift could serve as the prime basis of the much-needed update of the social contract among those groups.

The fundamental IAID technology is already available off the shelf, and advancements and improvements are coming on ever more frequently. That makes it possible now to individually identify every animal in the country for its entire lifetime and beyond. Radio-frequency identification devices implanted in animals already are being used in several ways in production agriculture (for example, weigh-sort systems for pigs and feeding stations for dairy cows).

When various live animal traits are measured and then associated with groups from a given farm, the quality of the production system at that farm can be evaluated. Average performance data are important, but so is the statistical nature of inter-individual variation in

performance, which cannot be calculated without information on each and every individual.

The IAID approach provides the sort of information that can be useful to producers in managing animal environment, genetics, health, nutrition and reproduction as well as in purchasing-contract decisions and transactions by processors and purveyors.

Information is power. Information based on IAID can be used by producers to improve their husbandry, by processors to evaluate the quality of the animals coming from a given farm and by purveyors to assure their customers and consumers that the foods they are selling are safe and wholesome and come from socially responsible farms.