

Should Animal Welfare Policy Be Influenced By Consumers' Perceptions?

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■ Take Home Messages

- ▶ Perception is reality when it comes to consumers' concerns about animal welfare
- ▶ The animal industries are facing increased regulatory and legislative oversight on farm animal welfare issues in part due to perceived failure to address welfare issues in an appropriate, timely manner
- ▶ While all animal welfare policies must be grounded in science, incorporation of consumer's perceptions is also necessary

■ Introduction

Efforts to increase food animal welfare protection have been underway for many years. Over the past decade, food retailers, animal industry groups and other private sector organizations involved in food animal production have developed and adopted various animal welfare assurance programs to reassure consumers about farm animal welfare and food safety (Schweikhardt and Browne, 2001; Croney and Millman, 2007; Swanson, 2003; 2008).

More recently, legislation has been the main approach for increasing such protection in the US, a fact that has caused concern in many members of the US food animal industries and their stakeholders. A flurry of legislative activity has taken place on a statewide level across the US. For example, California, Oregon, Florida, Arizona, Colorado, New Jersey, Michigan and Ohio have all passed legislation geared toward reforming conventional industry standards for housing swine, laying hens and veal calves (Croney and Millman, 2007; Mench, 2008; Swanson, 2008).

With the exception of Ohio, most of these state level initiatives have been spear-headed by animal protection groups, a fact that has frustrated the

agricultural community, especially given that some of these groups appear to be opposed to animal agriculture. Thus, a major criticism of this approach is whether the legislation truly reflects broad public concerns. Others have also raised the issue of whether the preferences of a rather small number of people should be allowed to place constraints on the food choices of the majority of society (Bennett, 1997). However, the voting public in US states facing such measures have generally supported them.

For example, in November 2006, voters overwhelmingly supported state ballot measures on animal welfare with approval rates of 60% or higher. Voters in California in 2008 also passed Proposition 2, which regulated the housing of gestating sows, egg laying hens and veal calves (Tonsor et al., 2010). Likewise, in 2009, voters supported Ohio's Issue 2, which proposed the development of a Livestock Care Standards Board (the first animal industry-led initiative) to provide oversight of farm animal care practices.

These events suggest that regardless of how small the number of people who turn out to vote may be, and how disparate their views may be from the majority, some citizens are concerned enough to support increased protection for farm animal well-being. Moreover, these citizens are effectively determining state policies, largely because of beliefs that food animal welfare issues are not being properly addressed by those involved in animal agriculture.

■ **Are Consumers Really Concerned About Animal Welfare And What Is The Nature Of Their Concerns?**

Animal welfare is not generally a top of mind issue for most consumers. However, when attention is drawn to welfare problems, many people tend to have strong emotional responses. Understanding this requires appreciating that 1) all animal welfare concerns are fundamentally about animal quality of life and 2) such concerns are rooted in the belief that humans have a moral responsibility to maintain some basic, acceptable standard for animal care and well-being which extends even to those animals that are used for food (Croney and Anthony, 2009).

Correspondingly, in many European Union nations and recently, in the US, concerns have been raised about the welfare of farm animals reared in intensive confinement and in high densities. Such environments limit animals' abilities to move around freely, often require animals to undergo painful physical alterations to minimize their risks of injuring themselves and others (e.g., beak-trimming of laying hens) and may also require producers to feed antibiotics to minimize disease transmission. The latter practice often evokes additional concerns related to food safety, environmental impacts and human

health implications related to antibiotic resistance (Croney and Anthony, 2009). This is troublesome for animal agriculture, because as consumers are becoming more interested in the production history of their food, some are particularly worried about how food producing animals are treated in large scale production systems, and overall themes of ethical consumerism (Singer and Mason, 2006) depict contemporary intensive production of livestock and poultry as an unpalatable and unsustainable choice for a growing segment (Croney and Anthony, 2010).

Evidence that the US public perceives a need for greater legal protection of farm animals has been found repeatedly in national polls. For example, a 1995 Gallup poll showed that 91% of those surveyed disapproved of veal calf housing, while in 2003, 62% supported passing strict laws governing farm animal treatment. Also, a 2004 survey of Ohioans found that 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "farm animals should be protected from feeling physical pain" (Rauch and Sharp, 2005).

Overall, the published data suggest that in regard to farm animals, welfare concerns center around issues related to animal pain and suffering, as well as the animal's capacity to function well, and to engage in normal behaviors (i.e., those behaviors that are species-typical adaptations) (Fraser et al., 1997).

These concerns are all broadly addressed by the Five Freedoms, which were outlined by the Brambell Committee in the United Kingdom in 1965 (Webster, 2001), and which have become the hallmark of many contemporary animal welfare initiatives. The Five Freedoms include 1) freedom from hunger and thirst, 2) freedom from discomfort, 3) freedom from pain, injury or disease, 4) freedom to express normal behavior and 5) freedom from fear and distress.

However, different stakeholders of animal production may prioritize or value the various aspects of animal welfare delineated in the Five Freedoms differently. Typically, those involved in farm animal production have attended to the physical aspects of animal welfare outlined in the Five Freedoms. In contrast, current legislative efforts spearheaded by animal protectionists in the US focus on the behavioral and psychological aspects of animal welfare pertaining to the Five Freedoms, an emphasis that appears to resonate with voters and many consumers of animal products.

While this may seem to place the priorities of consumers at odds with those of producers, it is important to note that most consumers *presume* that farmers take good care of their animals. In other words, consumers believe that producers meet their animals' needs for food, water and shelter. However, many appear to be concerned that especially in "industrialized" farming, *producers provide care for farm animals' basic needs but do not sufficiently show that they care about the experience animals are having or the quality of life they are experiencing* (Croney and Anthony, 2010). People seem to be

troubled about insufficient attention being paid to how animals may feel, particularly when they are kept in conditions where they are unable to engage in normal behaviors that may be important to them. Media exposés depicting farm animal neglect, mistreatment, or outright animal abuse therefore are likely to heighten any latent concerns about farm animal care and welfare.

Thus, what many consumers seem to be asking is for animal producers to address all or most of the Five Freedoms in their animal care practices and policies, rather than focusing only on those pertaining to the physical aspects of animal well-being. Apparently, some consumers feel strongly enough about these issues that they are willing to act on their concerns via the voting booth, even though their purchasing behavior may fail to reflect their beliefs (Appleby, 2005).

■ Is There A Role For Consumer Perceptions In Creating Animal Welfare Policy?

In regard to discussions of animal welfare regulation, it is common for those involved in farm animal production to insist that “policies must be based on science.” The implication is that science alone should drive policy and that other factors, such as ethical considerations, are “emotional”, and thus, without merit. However, it has been well documented that scientists often fail to consider the role of values in lay people’s risk assessment/decisions (Tannenbaum, 1991; Fraser, 2003) and the idea that sound animal welfare decisions can be made only on the basis of science has been discredited (Tannenbaum, 1991; Thompson, 1993; Fraser, 2000). Even the choice of which definition of welfare is utilized, and which factors are prioritized, such as animal function, hedonism (enjoyment or pleasure) vs. suffering or pain, or natural living (telos) reflects the underlying values of the decision-makers (Duncan and Fraser, 1997; Appleby and Sandoe, 2002).

The question, therefore, that seems to be latent as debates about food animal welfare policy continue, is whether and to what extent consumers’ perceptions *should* be a relevant factor in driving animal welfare policies. US food animal producers seem increasingly frustrated at the level of scrutiny and oversight to which they are subjected, which is understandable given that they consistently meet the public’s demands for safe, inexpensive food. However, in a democratic society, where all citizens can potentially vote, it is illogical to suggest those who feel strongly enough about animal welfare issues to make their voices heard on policy decisions should not exercise their right to do so, or that their views should be disregarded. Further, given that animal agriculture is a business, much like any other, it would seem obvious that the consumer’s preferences must be considered. Although the customer may not

“always be right,” a business cannot show open contempt for its patrons' expectations and expect to survive and thrive.

However, what is agriculture to do if the consumer is not cognizant of the implications of their preferences, or rejects scientifically tested practices that promote safe, abundant food? Should their perceptions still be considered and incorporated? Moreover, how can consumer preferences realistically be incorporated when they occasionally conflict? For example, some production practices, such as intensive confinement of animals that are currently criticized as creating animal welfare problems, are primary factors in keeping animal products relatively inexpensive. Further, relatively little data exists demonstrating that consumers are willing to pay the costs of improved standards for farm animal care. Consequently, conflicts of interest arise that potentially pit concerned consumers against animal producers. Nonetheless, animal agriculture must resolve these issues or risk alienating consumers and ultimately, undermining their respective industries' long-term viability.

Thus far, US animal agriculture has responded by attempting to convince consumers that their concerns are either irrational or without merit. This approach to consumer education is bound to alienate many people who are already convinced that their position on animal welfare issues is reasonable. A more effective approach may be to validate consumers' concerns (or at least demonstrate that such concerns have been heard and acknowledged) and then engage consumers in discussions about the costs and constraints related to accommodating their interests, especially when these conflict. In addition, some welfare concessions that can be scientifically supported may need to be made as a good faith gesture. In return, consumers must be enlisted to financially support producers who are willing to make such concessions. These suggestions would appear to be supported by Tonsor and Wolf's (2010) finding that perceptions regarding the accuracy of information provided to consumers on animal welfare by animal agricultural and consumer groups are key determinants of people's voting behavior, and that voters do not fully understand the cost implications of animal welfare legislation.

■ Summary

Animal agriculture cannot ignore consumer perceptions in deriving policies or practices pertaining to farm animal care. Whether it is desirable or not, the perceptions of a relatively small number of consumers are already shaping US animal welfare policies. It is also unhelpful for animal agriculture to resist making some necessary changes relative to animal welfare simply because the perception is that such changes are being driven primarily by animal protection groups. Clearly, these groups have gained traction because their message about acceptable quality of life for food animals resonates with

many citizens. Failure to address these issues provides impetus for concerned citizens to attempt to externally regulate the industry's practices as has been suggested previously by Rollin (2004).

Nonetheless, there is a difference between pandering to versus carefully attending to consumer's perceptions. While it is essential to consider public opinion in crafting animal welfare policies, animal agriculture cannot derive policy based solely on perceptions. For one thing, it may be impossible to simultaneously accommodate all of the consumer's concerns. Also, in some instances, certain consumer demands may not be in the best interests of the animals themselves. When the latter is genuinely the case, consumers must be informed of this, preferably by objective, trusted entities, as they are capable of appreciating that the ethical value of animal welfare may sometimes be compromised by competing values such as food safety and accessibility (Verbeke and Viaene, 2000).

Meeting emerging consumer demands, such as assurances of high animal welfare, is a challenge to which animal agriculture must rise despite reluctance to make changes to existing practices. However, proper understanding of and education of consumers is essential to achieve adequate animal welfare policies that are scientifically grounded, publicly supported and demonstrably beneficial for animals and humans. It is therefore essential to focus on bridging the gap between producers and consumers relative to their mutual understanding of each other's priorities, values and constraints relative to farm animal welfare.

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