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ANIMAL ADVOCACY IN COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE

It's Not New And It Has An Economic Dimension

by Carl Zulauf and Matthew Krause

Animal advocacy is not new. Prohibitions against animal cruelty and legislation to ensure animal welfare have long been part of the U.S. policy agenda. However, conflicts associated with animal advocacy have become more vigorous as animal advocacy has expanded to include the new dimensions of animal rights and zero-based animal use.

➤ Commercial livestock producers tend to view animal advocacy as restrictions on their right to provide income for their families. Animal advocates argue that animal well being has a public value which is at least as important as the pursuit of private profit. The public policy issue is where to draw the line between animal well being, the pursuit of private profit, and the cost of regulation to consumers. The likely policy outcome is increased regulation of the well being of commercial livestock, but the regulations will have only limited economic effect on livestock producers.

In this article, the dimensions of animal advocacy are discussed as an evolving continuum of thought regarding the relationship between humans and other animals. Next, the policy and economic context of the animal advocacy debate regarding commercial livestock production are reviewed. The paper ends with an integrated set of policy-related observations.

The Animal Advocacy Continuum

Historically, humans have imposed prescriptions against killing animals with cruelty or malicious intent. However, during the 19th Century broader concerns arose about the humane care of animals used in agriculture, companionship, recreation, and research. A key issue was whether animals can experience suffering, not just at death, but also during their life. In 1873, the U.S. Congress passed a law which required that animals be unloaded for feed, water, and rest for at least five consecutive hours after 28 hours in transit. In passing this law, Congress implicitly endorsed the growing public consensus that animals can suffer during their life.

During the last half of the 20th Century, arguments have been raised that animals possess rights which extend beyond the avoidance of suffering. Some humans argue that other animals possess rights which are equivalent to those possessed by

humans. Stated with some simplicity, this animal rights movement raises concerns related to the contentment of animals. For example, animal rights advocates argue that modern confinement practices which inhibit an animal's natural behavior lower the animal's well being even if the practices do not cause suffering. Animal rights advocates would not necessarily prohibit the use of animals by humans, although some would permit their use only as companions.

In contrast to animal rights advocates, advocates of zero-based animal use would outlaw any use of animals by humans, including their use as companions. A key foundation for this viewpoint is the argument that placing an animal in an unnatural environment is a violation of the animal's moral rights. Farm groups often associate zero-based animal use with all animal advocates, but this position is actually at one end of the animal advocacy continuum and is embraced by only a very small number of people.

The Policy Context

Animals can adapt to stress to some extent, but extreme stress may result in increased incidence of injury, disease, and mortality, as well as decreased reproductive prolificacy. Therefore, given their pursuit of private profit, commercial livestock producers as a group are unlikely to use production practices which cause stress and suffering that result in economic losses. On the other hand, producers are unlikely to adopt livestock practices which increase animal well being, but reduce their income.

Animal advocates argue that the well being of animals has a public value that is at least as important as the pursuit of private profits, and some argue that animal well being has a greater public value. The issues raised by animals rights and zero-based animal use advocates ask whether modern confinement production practices negatively affect the well being, in particular contentment, of animals. This core question translates into the public policy question: should commercial livestock husbandry practices be regulated to enhance animal well being, specifically their contentment?

Like other good husbandry issues such as soil conservation and control of pollution, the regulation of livestock production practices will eventually be decided by the political system. Society will be asked to strike a balance between (1) animal well being, a "product" not priced in any market, (2) the private profits earned by livestock producers, and (3) the expenditures by consumers for animal products.

Likely Policy Response and Economic Implications

The evolution of human thought regarding the rights of other animals suggest that humans will decide that other animals can experience contentment as well as suffering. Such an evolution in thought will likely lead to increased regulation of commercial livestock practices. On the other hand, the American political system tends to foster evolutionary compromise rather than revolutionary change. Given the evolutionary momentum of animal advocacy and the evolutionary restraint of the political system, a reasonable guess as to the public policy resolution of what constitutes good husbandry in commercial livestock production is increased regulation to enhance animal well-being, but the regulations will not eliminate prevalent livestock production practices.

Some legislated regulations undoubtedly will increase livestock production costs. Because livestock production occurs in a competitive market, higher per unit production costs will eventually be covered by higher output prices. Higher prices will

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translate into lower consumption; however, the decline in consumption probably will be minimal because U.S. demand for livestock products is relatively inelastic (i.e., unresponsive) with respect to price. Because the change in consumption is likely to be minimal and prices will increase to cover the higher per unit production costs, marginal regulation of livestock production practices will have only minimal long term effect on U.S. livestock producers as a group. This conclusion assumes that the regulations will not increase costs enough to place U.S. livestock production at a comparative international disadvantage, resulting in increased U.S. imports of livestock products.

While producers as a group are unlikely to be major losers in the long run, individual producers could suffer large losses. In addition, producers as a group are likely to suffer losses during the implementation of regulations which increase production costs because they lack the economic power to immediately raise prices to offset the higher costs. Thus, transitory public assistance, such as cost sharing, could be provided to producers.

Consumers are likely to incur larger economic losses than producers because of the higher prices they will pay for livestock products. But, in a political tradeoff, they may be willing to transfer some economic welfare from themselves to other animals in the form of regulations to enhance animal well being. Consumers' willingness to enhance animal well being is unlikely to include regulations which significantly impair the efficiency of livestock production because the resultant increase in prices is likely to result in an unacceptable loss in consumers' own well being.

Final Observations

- Animal advocacy is an evolving concept that reflects public beliefs about the desired interrelationship between humans and other members of the animal kingdom.

- Reflecting the evolution of animal advocacy, it is likely that humans will decide that other animals can experience contentment as well as suffering.

- Because most humans relate to other animals as pets, they implicitly believe that the presence of humans is a right of domesticated animals. The presence of humans is a defining characteristic of modern livestock production. Thus, widespread existence of pets provides a common ground between the public at large and commercial livestock producers, which translates into public good-will for livestock producers.

- However, strong pressures will exist for the commercial livestock industry to demonstrate good faith toward its own animal advocacy. The industry may find it desirable to establish self-policing procedures, with animal advocates serving on advisory boards.

- If the commercial livestock industry demonstrates good faith toward its own animal advocacy, the industry should suffer little economic impact from increased regulation to enhance animal contentment.

- The major economic implication of the current animal advocacy debate is the likely transfer of economic welfare from consumers to animals in the form of increased animal well being. This choice is the right of consumers in a democracy.