

# *Livestock and Poultry Care and Welfare*

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## Introduction

Attempts to regulate on-farm care of livestock and poultry have, for the most part, been unsuccessful at the federal level. However, states are the new staging grounds for setting public policy and practices for farm animal care. The most notable event was the passage of the Florida referendum banning sow gestation stalls. Couple this with the recent actions by food retailers and you have an industry under siege. Is this the clarion call for setting national standards for the care of livestock and poultry? Is the public concerned about the conditions and practices to which our livestock and poultry are subjected?

A carefully planned, expertly worded, third party survey into the values and attitudes of the public relative to the care and treatment of farm animals would be enormously useful to plotting the course for industry. However, many surveys fall short of this goal. For example, an industry commissioned survey of consumers (defined as an individual who eats their product) is conducted at randomly selected grocery sites. The survey reveals that consumers of the product do not rank animal welfare at the top of their list of concerns. Does this mean industry is not obligated to change except when a specific consumer public commands? Are product consumers the only stakeholders in the welfare of the animal? History tells us that a more democratic process has been used to determine outcome of animal treatment issues (Garner, 1998). Be it through state referendum or federal legislation or social mandate. Therefore the process by which action is taken (public at large) should also be reflected in the process by which concerns are assessed. Current survey work may fall short of inclusiveness, but does reveal that the nature of the questions posed concentrate on factors that can be collectively described as "quality of life."

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## Quality of Life

What makes up the quality of life of animals and birds under our care? We can start by recognizing that each species has been shaped by years of natural and artificial selection. Specialized beaks or muzzles, two or four legs, wings, digestive differences, breeding differences, and the list goes on. In some instances artificial selection has not sought to change a fundamental need, for example, social behavior. Our domestic livestock and poultry evolved from ancestors with a strong (and naturally reinforced) behavior to live in social groups. This behavior was also conducive to domestication and successful exploitation in agriculture. Fitness and survival were greatly enhanced by the successful execution of social behavior thus this trait remains solidly embedded within the framework of farm species. For example, sheep display an extreme stress response to social isolation and restraint that can affect meat quality (Apple et al., 1995). Therefore the quality of life of many of our domestic agricultural species includes social interaction or contact. Although undesirable social behavior has been manipulated (e.g. temperament, feather pecking) there has been no concentrated effort to eliminate sociality as a whole. Other factors such as lack of fear, avoidance of unnecessary pain and distress, and ability to adapt and perform a reasonable range of normal behavior under production conditions contribute to the quality of life an animal will experience.

In addition to behavior, known physiological demands such as food, water, shelter, bedding, temperature, preventive health measures, control of indoor environments and atmospheric quality, etc. round out the picture. The more restrictive and contained an environment becomes the greater the number of variables we control (versus the animal) for the quality of life. Quality of life can be impinged or certain aspects sacrificed as economic conditions dictate – another two hens in the cage, pigs in the pen, or cattle in the lot. Striking a balance between the quality of life demands by stakeholders is the challenge.

## Science and Values

Perhaps the most troublesome aspect of livestock and poultry care is setting a baseline for the quality of life. A cheap, abundant and safe food supply has been one of the guiding principles in agricultural production. Agricultural researchers use scientific methods to elucidate how to best reach the goal of producing an affordable, abundant and

safe food supply. Thus, science is driven by values, whether it is to value human life by curing disease or to discover efficient ways to raise animals for food. However, values can and do differ within a culture (public, corporate, scientific, etc.) . Variables selected to assess quality of life for a species can be influenced by these values (Fraser, 1999; Rollins, 1995; Thompson, 1993). For example, space allotment is a highly debated issue. Even the unsophisticated can conceptualize the value of space and related freedom of movement. But, animal and poultry scientists may seek to minimize space, maximize productivity and capture new efficiencies to satisfy a competing set of values. So the baseline for quality of life will differ depending on which set of values become operational. This also explains the differences in animal care standards acceptable to members of the European Union versus the United States. Operating values should be weighed into the development and assessment of animal care when setting the baseline for quality of life.

### International Standards

Food retailer activity in the arena of livestock/poultry care and welfare indicate their concern with providing assurance to their customers. The clout of the American public appears to be arriving by way of social pressure rather than traditional politics (Schweikhardt and Browne, 2001). In an intensely competitive industry such as the grocery and quick serve restaurant, sensitivities run high to customer concerns. After all, they hand the product directly to the consumer.

Considering the global nature of the food retail business, and the legislative actions by westernized countries, will international standards for animal welfare emerge? The World Organization for Animal Health, also known as the Office of International Epizootics (OIE), established an Animal Welfare Working Group in October 2002 (OIE, 2002). The mandate of the working group is to address public demand for animal welfare, to develop knowledge on the subject, propose recommendations at the international level and to integrate ethical, scientific, economic and political dimensions of the issue to achieve balance in decision making. Since animal welfare is not specifically addressed un-

der the World Trade Organization's Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement, member countries of the OIE requested guidelines and recommendations establishing best animal management practices that are congruent with good animal welfare. The OIE has identified priority issues for animals used in agriculture and aquaculture as follows: transportation, slaughter, killing for disease control, housing, and management practice. Members of the working group have been appointed from Canada, New Zealand, Belgium (EU), Kenya, India and Egypt. At the time of this writing there are no members from the United States appointed to the primary working group. The development of this international working group, coupled with the announcements of food retailers such as a McDonalds Global Animal Welfare Standards (McDonalds, 2002), signal a social and political impetus to coordinate and address the issue.

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