

11-2011

Public Opinion and Food Animal Welfare

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Cantrell, Randolph L., "Public Opinion and Food Animal Welfare" (2011). *Cornhusker Economics*. 514.
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CORNHUSKER ECONOMICS

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension

Public Opinion and Food Animal Welfare

In the October 12, 2011 edition of *Cornhusker Economics*, Professor Dave Aiken brought us up to date on the issue of food animal welfare as it might affect Nebraska agriculture. His update was rendered out of date a mere six days later when the Nebraska Farmers' Union (NEFU) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) announced an agreement and the formation of a new advisory body, the Nebraska Agricultural Council of the Humane Society of the United States. The stated goal of the new organization is "To advance more humane practices on farms and ranches and to promote food producers who share that goal."

This announcement did not sit well with We Support Agriculture (WSA), a coalition of prominent agricultural groups that includes: Nebraska Cattlemen, Nebraska Farm Bureau, Nebraska Pork Producers Association, Nebraska Poultry Industries and the Nebraska State Dairy Association. Formed only a month earlier (September, 2011) with the express intention of opposing "any effort" by HSUS to impose new limits on the agricultural industry, WSA immediately expressed "shock and disappointment" that the Nebraska Farmers Union would align itself with a group that aims to end animal agriculture.

In fairness to NEFU, as an organization they were never on board with We Support Agriculture. NEFU's leadership argued that refusal to even speak with HSUS or similar animal welfare groups would prove to be counterproductive. As advocates for smaller, family owned and managed farm operations, their arrangement with HSUS can be interpreted as an effort to secure a place in what are currently niche markets that demand welfare standards for animal products. Of course, as argued by WSA, it can also be seen as surrender to the

Market Report	Yr Ago	4 Wks Ago	10/28/11
<u>Livestock and Products,</u>			
<u>Weekly Average</u>			
Nebraska Slaughter Steers, 35-65% Choice, Live Weight.....	\$98.27	\$120.14	\$121.79
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame, 550-600 lb.....	120.26	152.32	155.74
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame 750-800 lb.....	116.00	138.77	145.00
Choice Boxed Beef, 600-750 lb. Carcass.....	161.54	183.19	186.97
Western Corn Belt Base Hog Price Carcass, Negotiated.....	52.68	89.25	86.21
Pork Carcass Cutout, 185 lb. Carcass, 51-52% Lean.....	74.23	97.83	*
Slaughter Lambs, Ch. & Pr., Heavy, Wooled, South Dakota, Direct.....	149.25	174.25	168.50
National Carcass Lamb Cutout, FOB.....	343.21	409.37	406.73
<u>Crops,</u>			
<u>Daily Spot Prices</u>			
Wheat, No. 1, H.W. Imperial, bu.....	6.02	5.91	6.43
Corn, No. 2, Yellow Omaha, bu.....	5.45	5.83	6.43
Soybeans, No. 1, Yellow Omaha, bu.....	11.76	11.14	11.88
Grain Sorghum, No. 2, Yellow Dorchester, cwt.....	9.23	9.66	10.98
Oats, No. 2, Heavy Minneapolis, MN, bu.....	3.63	3.45	3.52
<u>Feed</u>			
Alfalfa, Large Square Bales, Good to Premium, RFV 160-185 Northeast Nebraska, ton.....	170.00	185.00	190.00
Alfalfa, Large Rounds, Good Platte Valley, ton.....	*	140.00	132.50
Grass Hay, Large Rounds, Good Nebraska, ton.....	75.00	92.50	92.50
Dried Distillers Grains, 10% Moisture, Nebraska Average.....	160.00	202.50	222.50
Wet Distillers Grains, 65-70% Moisture, Nebraska Average.....	55.00	69.50	74.50
*No Market			

demands of an extreme and politically powerful animal rights group that is ultimately opposed to any use of animals for either food or entertainment.

Motivations aside, the potential for food animal welfare issues to be divisive within the agricultural community seems apparent. The potential for conflict both between HSUS and the agricultural industry, and within the industry itself highlights two forces that are in play. The first of these forces is largely economic. Agriculture is, after all a business, and regulation that might change either the cost or the level of productivity in raising food animals is likely to affect the profitability of that business. Second, agriculture is for most producers a way of life, and regulations that might change long established and sometimes cherished practices (branding, for instance) is likely to affect producers, their families and even communities.

Ultimately, public opinion will play a major role in how both the economic and the social effects of the animal welfare debate play out, and some very large retailers are betting that welfare standards for food animals are important to consumers now. Smaller (arguably niche oriented) retailers such as Whole Foods, have specific welfare standards for their suppliers. Since 2010, WalMart has certified all of their private label eggs as cage free.

McDonald's has established Animal Welfare Councils in both the United States and Europe, and conducts animal welfare audits throughout its global operation. McDonald's now claims that most (more than 90 percent) of their European eggs are cage free, and while they buy U.S. eggs from cage systems, they have established a cage size standard for their suppliers that is larger than found in many systems. They are also setting standards for swine housing that will move their suppliers away from gestation crates in favor of group housing. McDonald's claims to do all of this based upon sound scientific principles.

While market forces seem to be emphasizing welfare standards for food animals, welfare advocacy groups have been active in bringing government regulation into the mix with a series of successful ballot initiatives in several states. Those successes seem to have strengthened HSUS's hand in negotiating with the industry, and are generally seen as an important motivation for organizations like the United Egg Producers to participate with HSUS in arriving at welfare standards, and the development of welfare policies and regulations.

How the issue of food animal welfare will play out in Nebraska is currently unknown. We Support Agriculture's members are clearly committed to resisting any effort on the part of HSUS to wage a

successful ballot initiative campaign in our state. The importance of the Nebraska food animal industry and the place of agriculture in our state heritage may make such an initiative a difficult undertaking here. However, even in Nebraska the number of residents having direct contact and thus familiarity with agricultural practices is declining, and an effective campaign for regulation would involve a voting population much broader than that represented by farmers, ranchers and their neighbors.

The 2011 Nebraska Rural Poll asked non-metropolitan Nebraskans about their opinions regarding food animal welfare. The results from several of the poll's questions are summarized in Table 1 (on next page). Non-metropolitan Nebraskans generally feel themselves to be familiar with current animal care practices (62 percent either agree or strongly agree with that self-description). They also express overwhelming agreement (95%) with the proposition that animal welfare means providing adequate food, water and shelter to livestock animals.

When asked about the more controversial behavioral aspects of animal welfare, in this case exercise space and social activities for the animals, the poll also found a strong majority (70%) in support. It is this aspect of animal welfare that causes the most concern among food animal producers, since it would, if strictly interpreted, have the greatest effect on current production practices, especially housing.

Non-metropolitan Nebraskans in the majority feel that "family farms" do a better job of protecting the welfare of animals than do "large, corporate farms." The terms family, large and corporate were intentionally left undefined in the survey, so their meaning is whatever the respondent attributed to them. Thus, this response may in part reflect Nebraska's historical antipathy to corporate control of agricultural resources. However, it likely also taps a belief that family scale ownership and management reflects a closer connection to the land and livestock than would be found in a more impersonal corporate management system.

In general, non-metropolitan Nebraskans are willing to accept the proposition that farmers and their veterinarians know best how to ensure the welfare of food animals (84%). They are also in the majority (56%) of the opinion that current regulation of livestock practices is adequate to ensure food animal welfare.

The previous two opinions notwithstanding, non-metropolitan Nebraskans were rather evenly divided on the question of whether or not more regulation of livestock practices is required to adequately ensure the welfare of food animals, with 30 percent of those responding agreeing that more regulation is needed, compared to 36 percent who disagreed and 34 percent

Table 1. 2011 Nebraska Rural Poll: Responses to Questions Regarding Food Animal Welfare

	Percent Responding		
	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Neither	Agree or Strongly Agree
I am familiar with current animal care practices used to raise livestock and poultry.	15	24	62
Animal welfare means providing adequate food, water and shelter to livestock animals.	3	2	95
Animal Welfare means more than providing adequate food, water and shelter; it also includes adequate exercise, space and social activities for the animals.	15	17	70
The welfare of animals is better protected on family farms than on large, corporate farms.	7	19	74
Livestock farmers and their veterinarians know how best to ensure the welfare of food animals.	4	12	84
Current regulation of Nebraska livestock practices is adequate to ensure the welfare of food animals.	7	37	56
More regulation of livestock practices is needed to ensure the welfare of food animals.	36	34	30

Number of Respondents - 2,490

who were either undecided or had no opinion regarding that proposition. Given other responses, one might speculate that such regulation is seen as required for those large and perhaps impersonal corporate organizations, in which respondents have less faith as stewards of animal welfare. They would however, be applied to all producers.

The fact that 34 percent of respondents expressed no specific opinion regarding the need for additional regulation to protect the welfare of food animals suggests that an effort to generate such regulations in Nebraska would lead to a major effort aimed at swaying the opinions of undecided voters, and that the more persuasive argument could well carry the day.

It is important to remember when looking at these data that this survey was conducted among the non-metropolitan population. Both the Rural Poll and other research conducted in Nebraska have demonstrated that proximity to actual agricultural production is the single variable most closely associated with opinions regarding food animal welfare. The further one is removed from agricultural activities, the more likely one is to accept the idea that additional regulation of animal welfare is needed. Thus, it can be assumed that this opinion would be more often expressed among metropolitan residents, for whom agricultural practices are more distant.

None of this tells us who would “win” a hard fought ballot initiative in Nebraska. But it seems certain that whatever direction this issue takes, the University of Nebraska will find itself caught firmly in the middle

of the debate. University research is responsible for, if not creating, then certainly testing, many of the practices commonly found in livestock production today. Those practices have been most often judged against their ability to improve productivity and profitability. Both negotiated agreements between the industry and activists and government regulation are likely to add a new dimension to University animal-based research. In effect, they would introduce new dependent variables to that research, having to do not just with physical productivity (such as body weight gain and feed efficiency), but also with levels of discomfort, mental stress and species specific behaviors.

Some American universities have moved in this direction, adding ethologists (animal behaviorists) to their faculties and filling named positions in animal welfare. But even with such efforts, new directions in research and practices that might be seen as actually resulting in productivity declines, will be a hard sell on campus. Moreover, they are likely to be a hard sell among producers who have come to look upon the University as a source of information that enhances productivity.

At the same time as faculties try to balance a changing regulatory or market environment against the expectations of the agricultural industry, they will be creating courses aimed at students who will ultimately become the regulators. In Europe, one can obtain a Ph.D. in animal welfare, and if such is not currently available in the U.S., one suspects that it soon will be. In this country one can now find welfare specializations

in not only animal science, but also in criminal justice and law.

This will be a fine line for the University to walk, and it will not be made any easier by the conflict that seems to be appearing within the agricultural community itself. Maintaining our carefully cultivated position as unbiased purveyors of scientific information could prove to be difficult at best, when many of our closest friends and long-time clients fear that their livelihoods and way of life are threatened.

Change, or at least challenge, appears to be on the horizon, and in this writer's opinion it is likely to be a genuine big deal.

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The complete 2011 Rural Poll Report "Animal Welfare: Perceptions on Non-metropolitan Nebraskans," can be found at <http://ruralpoll.unl.edu>

Corporate animal welfare claims can be found online for the following:

McDonalds: http://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en/our_story/values_in_action/animal_welfare.html

WalMart: http://walmartstores.com/sites/sustainabilityreport/2009/en_sp_food.html

WholeFoods: <http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/meat/welfare.php>