

# Animal welfare: Not “us versus them”

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When my adviser informed me he thought I should take a course in animal welfare offered here at Purdue, I was more than a little nervous about what stood in front of me. Having spent my entire life in the dairy industry, I had many preconceived notions about animal welfare, based largely on the efforts of extreme animal rights groups such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). In my mind, the dairy industry and animal welfare were two diametrically opposed forces destined to perpetual disagreements, with little hope for harmony. I now see this could not be further from the truth.

Animal welfare is primarily focused on taking proper care of animals, something dairy producers have always been concerned with and quite good at. Having just completed this animal welfare course, my views about animal welfare have changed considerably. I have had the opportunity to learn a great deal from the instructor of the course, Dr. Ed Pajor, my fellow classmates and a series of world-renowned guest speakers, including Dr. Temple Grandin and Dr. Bernie

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Rollin. Before you think I've lost it or moved to “the other side,” let me share with you what I have learned.

Before discussing this issue, it is important to define a few important terms that are often erroneously used interchangeably. Animal welfare is defined as “the state of well-being brought about by meeting the physical, environmental, nutritional, behavioral and social needs of the animals or groups of animals under the care, supervision or influence of people.” In more general terms, it is the science of caring for animals. In many ways, animal welfare is simply an extension of the field of animal husbandry, which has historically focused on how to care for animals.

Proponents of animal welfare are primarily concerned with the

humane treatment of animals. Contrastively, animal rights generally refers to including animals as part of the moral community, considering their basic needs the same as our own. This philosophy may encompass the idea that animals should not be used for human purposes, including using animals for meat (or other food) products, work, research or recreation.

For those of us in animal agriculture, our opinions of animal welfare are based largely upon the actions and views of the extremist animal rights groups that receive all of the media attention. In reality, these groups represent only a small portion of people in our society who are concerned with animal welfare. Unfortunately, those people who believe animals should not be used for human

use may never be satisfied by our efforts to improve animal welfare.

On the other hand, there is tremendous potential for people involved in animal agriculture to find common ground with people concerned about animal welfare. In order for any progress to occur, each group must attempt to understand the beliefs of the other group. With that in mind, I would like to share with you the insight I have gained in the last few months.

## **It's not about animal abuse.**

I have always had difficulty in deciphering why people were concerned with farm animal welfare, recognizing examples of true animal abuse (i.e. beating of animals) are few and far between. In reality, instead of being concerned with these few exceptions, the public is primarily concerned with ensuring animals are provided a decent quality of life and are handled humanely on the farm, during transport and during slaughter.

Dr. Bernie Rollin, distinguished professor of philosophy, physiology and animal sciences at Colorado State University, refers to this as a new

“social ethic” that has emerged as the public has become more concerned with how animals are raised and not just whether or not they are abused. Rollin lists four concerns with animal suffering in today’s farming operations:

1. production diseases resulting from new productive practices
2. a shift away from providing individual attention to animals
3. physical and psychological deprivation of animals that may occur in confinement
4. hired labor on farms having less knowledge of how to properly care for animals.

### **Many people don’t understand how farm animals are raised.**

This is not a new revelation or problem. We are all aware that only a small percentage of the population is involved in production agriculture. However, this dynamic increases the potential for the general public to believe propaganda presented by extreme animal rights activists. I have heard some interesting views presented by some of my classmates in this course; some of them clearly indicated they had little prior exposure to production agriculture. Consequently, dairy producers should take every opportunity to work within their communities to educate and demonstrate efforts aimed at improving animal welfare.

At the same time, producers need to be wary of how they “spin” information presented to the general public. If these efforts do not accurately portray how farm animals are treated, the public will always be overly skeptical of information they are presented by any party interested in animal welfare, not just the extreme animal rights groups.

### **Animal welfare is a science.**

Some animal welfare scientists study the behavior of animals in an effort to understand what the animal’s normal behavior is, how changes in its environment affect its behavior and why animals behave the way they do. A portion of this behavioral research focuses on the study of stereotypes, defined as “repetitive, relatively invariant behaviors with no obvious function.”

Other animal welfare scientists attempt to quantify stress levels by studying physiological responses (as measured by cortisol, norepinephrine, epinephrine, etc.) to stressors. Stress is defined as “the biological responses that an animal uses to defend its homeostasis (the natural ability of the body to maintain health

and internal balance) from both internal and external stressors.”

### **Five freedoms**

A list of “five freedoms” developed by The Farm Animal Welfare Council in the United Kingdom provides a structural framework for how animals should be treated. The five freedoms are:

1. freedom from hunger, thirst and malnutrition
2. freedom from discomfort
3. freedom from pain, injury and disease

4. freedom to express natural behavior

5. freedom from fear and distress

Tremendous debate exists with regard to which of these freedoms can be realistically achieved in practice. Regardless, they provide a useful framework for asking the right questions in consideration of animal welfare.

The take-home message from this course in animal welfare, for me, has been that animal welfare is not necessarily an “us versus them” discussion. Rather,

both sides of this discussion can benefit from listening to the concerns of the other. Most people concerned with animal welfare are only interested in assurance that animals are well-cared for. Because farmers are, by their nature, also concerned about how animals are cared for, considerable common ground exists with regard to animal welfare. How this is accomplished may require some re-thinking of traditional practices, but ultimately dairy producers, dairy product consumers and the dairy cattle we work with benefit from efforts toward improving farm animal welfare. **PD**