ANIMAL WELFARE/RIGHTS ISSUES

During the past five to ten years, we've been exposed to a wide range of discussion about “animal welfare” and “animal rights.” The European countries have been especially active in considering and writing new legislation to regulate how farmers take care of their poultry and livestock. Practically, every major country has recognized the issue; and as a result, practically all poultry and livestock groups have responded with a list of guidelines for their respective industries.

The issues affecting the poultry industry are many and should be thoroughly understood by all poultrymen. The solutions being offered by various individuals and groups range from the ridiculous to the practical and from the economically prohibitive to the economically sound.

In general; most of the issues facing the poultry industry are centered around the questions of cages, feeding and watering techniques, forced molting, and beak trimming. Side issues include: slaughtering methods, transportation, alarm systems, inspection, emotional status of the flock, etc., etc.

Cages For Poultry

European legislators appear to be particularly adamant against cages for poultry. Most would like to prohibit the use of cages entirely. Industry pressure, though, will probably result in their continued use but with regulations relative to size, design, and stocking density.

Denmark banned cages in 1950, but the industry succeeded in getting the ban lifted in 1979. Switzerland is currently in the process of totally banning cages beginning in 1992 with no new cage construction allowed after 1982.

Most of the emphasis now appears to be directed at the questions of floor, feeder and watering space and general cage design. Floor space proposals range from 70 to 116 square inches per bird with a compromise probably at about 75 to 80 square inches per bird.

Individual countries have placed their own restrictions on the cage question.

- Floor slope - no greater than 12%
- Number of decks - No more than three
- Number of birds per cage - No more than 6
- Cage height - At least 16 inches
- Cage size - At least 248 square inches
If similar restrictions were imposed in the U.S., we estimate that colony sizes would have to be reduced by at least 25% in order to comply with the space restrictions.

Feeding and Watering

Most of the regulations proposed or enacted concerning feed and water are aimed at assuring plentiful supplies of feed and fresh water. In doing so, feeder space and water availability are described:

Feeder space - At least 6 inches per bird
Waterers - No more than 2 hens per cup, at least 2 cups per cage

forced Molting

The United Kingdom does not allow feed or water to be removed for more than 24 hours. This, therefore, limits their molting techniques to low nutrient programs e.g. low sodium. In general, welfarists are opposed to recycling layers. One reasoned that all stresses were merely intensified in the second cycle and this should not be condoned.

Beak Trimming

In general, beak trimming is not encouraged with exceptions allowed in cases of emergency and then only with veterinary supervision.

Animal Rights

Welfare seems hard enough to define, but "rights" appear even more so. It's difficult to use the normal connotation of the word because we're so accustomed to its use relative to humans e.g. "the power or privilege to which one is justly entitled."

Welfarists use terms such as "interests, desires, needs, emotional status, frustrations, fear, suffering, happiness, etc." in their references to the rights of animals. These are terms that we customarily apply to humans but have great difficulty in measuring quantitatively the level present in any individual. The welfarists would have us make a giant leap forward and learn how to apply poorly-understood human values to animals.

Others argue that cages are "cruel" to chickens because they limit the chicken's ability to bust, scratch, stretch, flap its wings, preen, fly, rest, etc. These are the rights of the chicken, and humans have no right to interfere--they reason.

Are Cages Cruel?

Several years ago, animal welfarists in Great Britain built a man-sized cage, placed a man in it, and hauled it around to shopping centers to demonstrate the inhumanity of cages. I'm sure we would all agree that cages are inhumane--or humans!

Cages for poultry, though, are not in themselves cruel. They allow us to take better care of our flocks than other- -alternatives. Fresh feed, water and air are always available--the chicken doesn't have to "worry" about anything. She doesn't have to walk around in her own feces nor does she have to be exposed to many of the feces or soil-associated diseases or parasitic organisms.
Measuring An Animal's Well-Being

Farmers have historically measured the well-being of their flocks by how they grew or produced. This probably is the most accurate measure of well-being ever discovered by man. It measures the physiological response of the entire organism to the total of the factors affecting it. Any one harmful factor will result in a drop in performance.

Many feel that we need new measures of animal comfort or stress. The old and proven technique of measuring performance responses is not only accurate, but it can be immediately translated into economic terms so that anyone can understand the effects of mistreating their animals.

Motivations In the Animal Welfare Movement

Without a doubt, there is a core of individuals who are sincerely concerned with the way we treat farm animals. Their concern is based upon observed cases of mistreatment and preconceptions as to how animals should be treated. In most cases, farmers would have an identical concern about actual cases of mistreatment.

Other segments of the movement are interested only in associated causes such as vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists, philosophers, small farm advocates, environmentalists, etc. They see the animal welfare movement as one which they can join to gain forces (and money) to indirectly achieve their own special objectives.

A third group includes the people interested in perpetuating the issue. These include the association employees, the book writers, the lecturers; and the fund raisers.

And finally, we see legislators in various countries enact laws with animal welfare implications but really directed at controlling the size, of their industries, regulating the size of farms or to affect competition from neighboring countries.

Where To From Here?

The industry must continue to provide their flocks with the best care possible and to avoid practices which cannot be justified in terms of performance improvement. The chicken knows when she's being mistreated, and she'll tell you!

The industry must carefully articulate its position on the issue and develop and follow guidelines of acceptable husbandry for their flocks. It should take an active role in educating the public of the real facts concerning the issue.

We will continue to see the sensational articles and TV programs because this is the easiest way to get the public's attention. Hopefully, most will be able to see through it and recognize it for what it is.

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