

Farm-to-Fork

University in Ames, Iowa, July 16-18.

“Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care,” Fikes said, quoting Teddy Roosevelt. He asked symposium participants to repeat the mantra three times.

Supermarkets share concern in consumer reaction, he explained.

Consumers visit a food retail outlet 1.6 times a week, and 54% of shoppers have a primary store. Consumers are diversifying, both in what they want and where they will go to get it.

For years, Fikes noted, the top three factors in consumer choice have been cost, convenience and taste, though “health and wellness” is steadily gaining ground to join the group.

Esoteric concerns are becoming more prevalent though, like whether the product was locally produced, environmentally sensitive, organic or non-GMO (not a genetically modified organism).

More and more factors are influencing consumers’ choices. Skepticism is widespread among consumers, especially with social-media-driven communication. There has been a breakdown of the expert voice. He added that consumers now are exposed to complex issues that we’re not qualified to evaluate.

“Not being an expert does not preclude having a strong opinion and sharing it,” he said

Consumers’ trust is gained through shared values rather than skill set. The levels of concern about food systems have been growing faster than others, especially about the humane treatment of animals.

The agriculture industry needs to overcome the bias against size. Big does not mean bad, Fikes said. A handful of consumers want to know everything about the raising of farm animals, but most just want to know that ranchers know what they are doing, that they care and that they do the right thing.

“The customers influencing animal welfare most want you to have heard their concerns,” he concluded.

—by Kasey Brown

A producer’s perspective

According to cattle feeder Anne Burkholder, her perspective on animal welfare is partly romantic and largely pragmatic. She said she believes in practical cattle-management practices, including application of proven technologies, to achieve profitability and, therefore, sustainability. She also believes conditions conducive to animal welfare can exist in a feedyard setting.

“The romantic in me wouldn’t allow me to go to work every day if that weren’t true,” stated Burkholder.

“Animal welfare plays a huge role in the sustainability of our cattle-feeding operation.”

Burkholder described how she, an urban Florida-raised female with a degree in psychology, married a Nebraskan and worked her way up the ranks to become manager of the family-

owned cattle-feeding business. She talked about making concern for animal welfare a part of the operation’s culture.

“It has to be a priority of management or

it won’t be a priority of the crew,” said Burkholder, emphasizing the need to make the mental, emotional and physical fitness of the cattle a consideration for every decision made.

Burkholder stated her preference for buying cattle at private treaty, which allows her to trace their health and handling history, as well as genetics. She talked about the advantages of using professional veterinary and nutrition consultants, but also the

need for managers to understand the reasons for their various recommendations. That

Perceptions of animal welfare vary between production sectors; speakers urge to reconcile.

by Kasey Brown, associate editor, & Troy Smith, field editor

Animal welfare means different things to different people (see “Understanding Welfare,” page 102), but those different people affect the entire production chain of the beef industry. How consumers view welfare may be different than cattlemen or packers, but the difference in perception can change access to markets. Understanding the differences and working to reconcile them will benefit consumers and everyone in the beef industry.

How do consumers affect animal welfare?

Most consumers just want to know that farm animals have a good life and a peaceful death, David Fikes, vice president of consumer/community affairs and communications for the Food Marketing Institute in Arlington, Va., told attendees of the 4th International Symposium on Beef Cattle Welfare hosted by Iowa State



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► Anne Burkholder, owner of Will Feed Inc., said cattle have to get a good start in life, receiving optimum nutrition, appropriate and timely disease immunizations and low-stress handling to perform well in the feedlot.





Perceptions

understanding must then be shared with the crew.

Burkholder said acclimation of newly arrived cattle is a standard practice at her feedyard. Taking the time necessary to make them familiar with new surroundings, helping them find feed and water, and training cattle to group and move more easily and quietly pays dividends. The operation also conducts two internal audits and one third-party audit, annually, to monitor compliance with the feedyard's 39 standard operating procedures.

"I believe in auditing because it holds people responsible," said Burkholder, "and my crew likes it. They want to know the results of every audit because we have created a culture where we all strive for excellence."

In Burkholder's opinion, management at the ranch level impacts animal welfare in the feedyard. Cattle have to get a good start in life, receiving optimum nutrition, appropriate and timely disease immunizations and low-stress handling. If they do not, the consequences often become apparent after they reach a feedyard. Cattle-feeding technologies are most effective when cattle are set up for success.

Burkholder said collaboration among industry segments may be the most important factor contributing to improved cattle welfare. She called for an end to old antagonisms to create harmony throughout the production chain.

"Seventeen years in cattle feeding has taught me that it's all about collaboration," concluded Burkholder. "We all have to remember that the journey to better animal welfare does not have a finish line."

— by Troy Smith

A meat packer's perspective

Animal husbandry is an integral component of all animal agriculture systems and it is an expectation of all, said Lily Edwards-Callaway.

"The debate over animal welfare stems from the fact that everyone has a different expectation," added Edwards-Callaway, who oversees animal welfare programs for JBS, the

world's largest beef-packing company. She called the meatpacking industry's perspective unique, because packers are in the middle — between the people who raise meat animals and the people who purchase the meat. Packers, she added, also have the ability to make a positive impact on animal welfare.

Edwards-Callaway said animal handling at slaughter facilities is subject to federal regulations addressing human handling, transportation, facility conditions and stunning of animals. Additionally, animal behaviorist and Colorado State University (CSU) professor Temple Grandin helped the American Meat Institute develop animal handling guidelines that have become

standard for the industry.

"Many packing companies undergo multiple third-party audits annually, as well as conducting internal audits to monitor humane handling within plants," said Edwards-Callaway, describing the packing industry's efforts to "professionalize" livestock handling. "The use of technologies such as remote video monitoring has also been adopted by many companies as a way to strengthen auditing, but also for employee training."

According to Edwards-Callaway, audits have helped packers improve handling methods to reduce animal slips and falls in unloading and holding areas and especially in crowding pens. Other areas where audits have led to improvement include minimizing stock prod use and improving stunning efficiency. In short, audits are benefiting animal welfare.

"In general, slaughter plants are operating at excellent levels," said Edwards-Callaway. "Technologies are providing opportunities for continued improvement."

— by Troy Smith

Current and future concerns

Retailers are the biggest drivers of change

in the production agriculture industry, said CSU's Grandin. While there have been many vast improvements in animal welfare, there are still issues on which the industry can be proactive.

Grandin said there are three types of welfare issues — abusive treatment in

undercover videos, housing or procedures, and — the biggest future issue — biological system overload.

She said biological system overload results in increased death losses and handling problems caused by beta-agonists, loss of disease and parasite resistance, foot and leg problems in rapidly growing animals, higher percentage of liver abscesses, and some genetic lines of animals have more abnormal behavior. Additionally, heat stress is now a huge issue.

She likened an animal to a country. If a country puts

all of its energy into stimulating the economy, then it has no energy left for military defense. In the case of the animal, if all energy is exerted to produce pounds, then its immune system has no energy left.

"Don't go crazy over-selecting for certain things," she recommended. "The best ranch animal is not the best feedlot animal."

She claimed the biggest issue in the future is religious slaughter. Religious slaughter is "in a bubble," and methods are not regulated. The two biggest issues with religious slaughter are that the throat is cut without preslaughter stunning, and the method used to hold and restrain the animal, which is often shackling and hoisting. Many Muslim religious leaders will accept preslaughter stunning, though orthodox kosher does not.

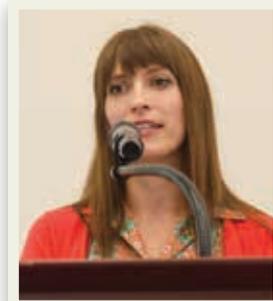
"To maintain an acceptable level of animal welfare with slaughter without stunning requires more attention to details of procedure," Grandin explained. Calm animals lose sensibility faster. A fast knife stroke is more effective, and she recommended performing the throat cut immediately after restraint. The knife should be twice the width of the neck and should be able to slice through a piece of paper. Release the pusher gate and head restraint after the cut.

She concluded that bad cannot become normal in any aspect of animal welfare.

— by Kasey Brown



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