

# The Animal Rights Battle

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*Editor's Note:* This is a must article for everyone concerned with any type of livestock production. These groups are active and slowly making advances.

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People in agriculture may be losing the animal rights battle. It is a battle many farmers and ranchers don't realize they are fighting. There is a movement underway to require farmers to protect the physical and emotional needs and rights of livestock.

The movement is based on a legitimate concern. None of us want to think we must obtain our food through needless suffering of other living creatures.



The animal rights movement has been underway in Europe for more than 30 years. In some cases, legislation has been passed that significantly changed production practices. For example, in Denmark only veterinarians can castrate certain animals. In Switzerland, the law prohibits the use of cages for laying chickens. Hens must be provided with perches and nests.

In the U.S., the animal rights or animal welfare movement is younger but more active. In fact, some of the groups advocate violence to "liberate" animals. It is estimated that there are over 400 groups with as many as 2 million members. Many of these people are young, affluent and politically active. The animal rights groups operate under the philosophy that animals have a right to share the earth equally with humans. They have targeted animal research centers, even those where critical human-health research is underway. They also targeted commercial animal production.

The major point being raised by animal welfare groups is that modern large-scale animal production can lead to cruel treatment of animals. Where a farmer once might have had in his care only a few head of livestock, he may now have hundreds or thousands.

In the case of poultry, it is common for a flock to number in the hundreds of thousands. Several poultry production units in the U.S. now have more than 1 million birds.

Livestock farmers are concerned about the animals they raise. Most are well trained in animal husbandry and are acutely aware of stress due to overcrowding. Chickens peck one another or don't lay eggs, pigs fight or develop ulcers, cows give less milk, and beef animals don't gain weight.

Most farmers take their stewardship of livestock ser-

iously. Besides they have a financial stake in the proper care of livestock.

One practice that has been singled out as being particularly offensive is putting laying hens into wire cages stacked from floor to ceiling extending from one end of a long building to another. The layers' total environment is controlled—temperature, humidity, and lighting. Food and water are always available. Eggs are automatically conveyed to a sorting and packaging room. Droppings are removed by an automated system for processing.

Granted, the chickens would probably be happier chasing crickets around a farmyard, but there is no way to tell. Poultry scientists say that by the factors they can measure—the state of health, egg production, and singing—the chickens appear to be happy. In fact they may be happier, each in its own wire condominium, than in the farmyard. They don't have to worry about chicken hawks or coyotes.

We occasionally hear of an animal rights group that breaks into a university or commercial research facility to release the animals and smash equipment. This guerrilla-warfare approach to animal welfare makes for widespread publicity for the cause. But even the animal rightsists know that the real way to change the situation is to get legislation passed.

Since 1980, more than 150 bills have been introduced, at the state and federal levels, that would restrict the use of animals in experiments of all types and place limits on livestock producers in running their own farm operations. Some of the animal rights groups, particularly the vegetarians, seek to eliminate most animal agriculture entirely. Thus far, the legislation has been stalled as politicians seek more information from those to be affected by the proposed legislation.

Of course, livestock farmers are resisting. They believe the laws are unnecessary since they work hard now to give the animals the best care possible. They are afraid the laws will raise the cost of production and put some livestock producers out of business. Agribusiness input marketers, such as feed companies and animal health pharmaceutical firms, are also lined up against the legislation. Consumer groups are split. They want to protect the animals but can see such laws raising the price of meat and other livestock products in the grocery stores.

Animal welfare is an issue Congress may have to decide in the near future. It is a battle livestock producers can not afford to lose. The first step in winning is to become knowledgeable about the issues.