

The animal farm becomes a kinder and gentler place

By William Pack

Posted: 05/19/2010 5:31 PM

MySA.com

Spawned by undercover video shot by animal-rights organizations and their well-funded campaigns, a national debate is under way over how well farm animals are treated.

As counterintuitive as it seems, the battle hasn't landed squarely in Texas, the nation's leading livestock producer. However, it is on the minds of Texans who worry about the emotions of the debate leading to a public groundswell of opposition, followed by harsh regulatory controls of a hefty portion of the state's economy.

And it's unnecessary, they say, as treating animals better just makes sense ethically and economically, and many already are changing their ways.

San Antonio-area rancher Frates Seeligson goes to great lengths to see that his cattle don't suffer, though by most definitions he wouldn't be considered an animal defense activist.

"I work tirelessly to have a stress-free environment," said Seeligson, whose herding practices are gentler than in years past.

He says his herders no longer yell at the cattle, they don't shove them or force them into corrals and they try to work with the nature of cattle rather than against it.

Not only is humane treatment part of the animal husbandry code Seeligson subscribes to, it's good business, the 40-year-old rancher said.

"No one wants to see an animal suffer," he said.

So far, animal welfare groups have focused their efforts on parts of the country where voters can initiate legislation by referendum, and that's not Texas. But experts say it's only a matter of time before the state lands at the top of the list.

"The question being asked is whether modern agricultural practices are inherently abusive," said Gene Hall, spokesman for the Texas Farm Bureau. "We say, 'No,' and the activists say, 'Yes.'"

Texas ranchers say the mistreatment that animal activists highlight is the exception and not the rule in their industry.

Livestock producers may dispute that their animals deserve the allowances given individuals or even some pets, but they say they've known a long while that well-treated animals are easier to handle and more valuable.

"A cow that's not taken care of, she's not as productive, period," said Russell Boening, a dairy operator and cattleman near Floresville.

The barn for his dairy cattle has fans and misters to keep the animals comfortable when they're in pens, and antibiotics are fed them only to combat illness.

“Most of us want to do it the right way,” Boening said.

Doing what's right has slowly evolved to include additional practices that keep animals from feeling pain or anxiety, ranchers said.

Seeligson, who ranches in Wilson, Guadalupe and Gonzales counties, said that includes things like redesigned corrals with more curved walkways that allow cattle to move at their own pace and castration sessions scheduled earlier in an animal's life so the recovery is easier. Also, rather than dehorn his cattle, he only takes the tips off for safety.

“Every time I stress my livestock, it's basically taking money out of my pocket,” he said.

Jay Johnson, who raises cattle south of Amarillo, said his ranching practices have changed greatly from what his father and grandfather did.

Johnson said he rarely uses a whip or even an electrified cattle prod any more. More time is taken to see the easiest way to get each cow to do what's needed, he said.

“It's a whole lot easier to work with the cattle than against them,” he said.

The animal welfare movement hasn't focused on the beef industry as much as it has on the confinement practices for chickens, pigs and calves for veal.

These animals' standard confinement practices “are the most out of step with mainstream American values about how animals ought to be treated,” said Paul Shapiro, a spokesman for the Humane Society of the United States, one of the lead organizations in the battle for animal rights.

The Humane Society has spearheaded legislative campaigns that will phase out the use of at least some of those confinement practices in seven states: Florida, Arizona, California, Colorado, Michigan, Maine and Oregon.

Michigan and California, the nation's second-biggest livestock producer behind Texas, are outlawing all three.

Shapiro said most of his organization's efforts this year will be focused on Ohio, where voters approved a livestock care standards board. He said he's willing to talk to Texas producers about reforms needed here, but had no timetable for those discussions.

Dena Jones, farm program manager for the Animal Welfare Institute, another leading animal defense group, said the movement is not trying to end animal agriculture as some producers fear. It hopes to support family farming by showing producers they can “make a good living off animals that are humanely raised,” she said.