

# Opinion: Well-being of livestock is worth worrying about

By Steve Chapman

Factory farming and its abuses were once the province of an eccentric minority that invited ridicule and scorn. Agribusiness corporations could afford to ignore them. In the real America, nobody wasted time worrying about the well-being of livestock.

But the real America has changed. On Monday, the biggest restaurant chain on the planet, McDonald's, lined up on the same side as the Humane Society of the United States on a major issue of animal welfare. It informed its pork suppliers that they will have to stop confining pregnant sows in "gestation crates" that are too small to let the animals turn around.



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McDonald's buys 1 percent of the pork sold in this country. When it tells pork producers to jump, they ask, "How high?"

Most Americans may not rank animal welfare high on the list of their chief concerns. But given the choice of food produced more humanely or less humanely, enough people will choose the latter to make continued indifference a bad business strategy.

McDonald's was preceded by such mainstays of American consumer culture as Burger King, Wendy's, Sonic and Winn-Dixie stores, which have moved against gestation crates. Smithfield Foods – the world's largest pork producer and one of the most reviled – has also promised to eliminate these cages by 2017. These are not companies whose customer base consists of vegans in plastic shoes who regard meat as murder.

It's no surprise that Whole Foods Market has built an empire partly by making animal welfare part of its identity. The chain is also known for rarefied offerings and high prices. But retailers like Wal-Mart and Costco, which specialize in mass-market products at bargain prices, are on board as well. Their private label eggs all come from uncaged hens.

In the past seven years, cage-free eggs have increased their share of sales to 8 percent up from 2 percent. A substantial number of Americans are willing to pay a bit more to avoid a conflict between stomach and conscience.

They may not have to. A 2007 study conducted at an Iowa State University research farm found that "group housing may produce pigs at a lower cost than individual gestation stalls in confinement facilities."

The egg industry is likewise adapting to changing norms. The United Egg Producers recently reached agreement with the Humane Society to support federal legislation mandating better conditions for laying hens.

Most of these birds spend their lives with just 67 square inches of space – smaller than the size of a standard sheet of paper. The bill would increase it to at least 124.

It would also afford them "enriched" environments where they can scratch, perch, nest and generally behave in a chicken-like manner. Egg cartons would have to carry labels to specify if the hens were caged, cage-free or free-range.

Two states have already banned the notorious “battery cages,” where multiple birds are crammed into small spaces. Given that eight states have banned gestation crates, more protections for hens are very likely.

This may sound like a radical development, but it’s only a natural expansion of normal human sympathies for our fellow creatures. You don’t have to be an animal rights zealot to believe humans are not entitled to inflict needless misery on pigs or other livestock. If dogs and cats are protected from cruelty, why not the animals we eat?

Defenders of the status quo may dismiss their critics as insular urbanites who know nothing about farming. But some of the critics are just a generation removed from rural life and know there used to be better ways to produce food from animals.

Producers are not really to blame for the dismal conditions in factory farms. They are merely responding to the relentless competitive pressure to eliminate every unnecessary expense.

Mandates from major corporations – or from governments – allow them to adopt new methods without being undercut by less scrupulous suppliers. They provide a space within which humane impulses can assert themselves.

Americans have a strong attachment to the freedom to live their lives with a minimum of interference. But they understand there is no human right to abuse animals.

Before he ascended to the papacy, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger decried battery cages for the “degrading of living creatures to a commodity,” a lament that applies to other factory methods as well. When the Pope and McDonald’s are both against something, odds are high its time is past.

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