
ANIMAL WELFARE—POLITICS OR FACTS?

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It is a pleasure to be here, though, as Bill Baumgardt will tell you, I was a little reserved about taking on this particular issue. My reluctance was related to the fact that this is a very sensitive and politically difficult topic to address. I hope that gives you some idea of the nature or background of my title: “Animal Welfare—Politics or Facts?”

Fortunately, though, I do see this as a major question that can still be answered, as contrasted to some on which we have already gone beyond that point in the environmental area. I think, however, regardless of the political discomfort and sensitivities one might have in dealing with this issue, it is one that needs the attention of the agriculture industry *now*, because later on the perceptions brought forth by the political activists on this issue will be even more firmly entrenched in the mind of the public—a public which will ultimately drive a change in policies through the legislative and regulatory process. We must understand this important point: the public will decide! Of course the question is: will they do that on the basis of informed decision making or based upon a very narrow view put forth by the agenda of a political activist group?

So it is important to deal with the issue now as one of concern, rather than letting it evolve into a political crisis. Because if or when this issue gets to that level, particularly if it's void of a foundation of objective science, then anything can happen. My sense, by virtue of your attendance at this symposium, is that each of you believes in trying to shed some light on the final outcome.

Having said that, I want you to consider my biases. One, I've been in agriculture all my life. I've been around livestock. We raise 13,000 pigs per year. We do all we can to insure the physical comfort of our animals. We do this because we believe that it is in our own enlightened self interest, i.e., a happy pig is a productive pig! However, I am fully aware that I am viewed by some involved in this issue as part of the problem and that—at least from their perspective—it is unlikely that I'll be part of the solution. In addition, because of my experience along the banks of the Potomac, I also bring a second and perhaps mildly jaded view of the political arena within which this issue will ultimately migrate. So you may want to be cautious and wary of my perspective.

* *Banquet Speaker*

Animal welfare . . . politics or facts? I think I've clearly established it is going to be at least one of these—it is going to be political at some point in time. The real question: is it going to be the other, as well? It's really not a choice. It's one or both—not either/or. Perhaps the more important question is: who's going to decide?

It's like the old army recruiter during the war looking for recruits. He rode into one town, and everywhere he looked he saw targets with bullet holes in the middle. Wanting to find the source, he went into the local watering hole and asked the bartender what he knew about this. The old bartender smiled and pointed to the town drunk sitting in the corner. He walked over to him, struck up a conversation with the drunk, and asked how he had such accuracy when he was inebriated most of the time. The drunk responded "Aw shucks, sir, I just shoot first and draw the targets later!"

We make policy that way sometimes! The point is—who is going to draw the target? The political activist . . . the Washington insider . . . the media . . . or perhaps some of you sitting in this room? From my perspective, I would hope it would be one of you here who, first, helps us to ask the right questions and, second, uses the principles of science to lead us in the direction of pursuing the right answers.

I would issue a little warning, however. From watching some of the environmental issues, I found that if you wait for someone to ask you to accept this responsibility, you're probably going to be disappointed. Look at the interests in this issue. Who's going to demand the information?

The animal rightists? They have a political agenda. To them facts are messy and get in the way.

Those truly interested in animal welfare? Maybe. In fact, that's how I determine the difference between politically oriented groups and those really wanting to solve real concerns.

The public? Probably not, at least right now, although they may one day wonder what the straight scoop really is right after they've heard a 30-second sound bite about the subject on the evening news.

Legislative and regulatory bodies? They may, but even some of them will hold you suspect depending on the lobbying they're getting from special interests.

The animal industry? Yes, they'll expect it, but even here support is not unanimous. Some producers will say, "you're our hope," yet others will respond, "What if they find out something we don't like?"

The point is the demand for what you must do is not easily discernible—and you're likely to get mixed signals even from those you think you are serving. For years you have developed new knowledge on a broad array of scientific fronts, and we in agriculture and the public accepted it with open arms. But the world has changed a bit lately, and some in society are not so sure. Take BST, a revolutionary new development, yet those who developed it are beginning to wonder if it's even going to be used as a technology. Currently it's being

torpedoed from a number of directions, not the least from some in the dairy industry. But that's the political thing I'm talking about—the world beyond and outside of the “fact” that society and the industry can benefit the adoption of this technology.

It might be easy for you to conclude that I think you shouldn't even get involved because of the risks associated with doing so. However, I want to leave no such impression. Allow me a short story about one of my seven children.

It was during the drought of 1990. I was home for the weekend from Washington. I headed to the field to take a look at the seriousness of the situation with my eight-year-old son. I admit that I was somewhat preoccupied with my own problems. Neil started in on the questions. “Dad, is it going to rain?” “Neil, I don't know!” Then, “Dad, are the corn plants going to die?” “Neil, I don't know—depends on when it rains.” Finally, “Dad, can God make it rain?” How do you answer that question for your eight-year old, particularly when it hasn't rained for two months? I responded, “Neil, I don't know, but I hope so.” We started back to the shop. One more question on the mind of my inquisitive eight-year old, “Dad, I ask a lot of questions, don't I—hope you don't mind?” I responded, “Of course not, Neil, how are you going to learn?” Neil responded, “I don't know.”

It's not a viable alternative for us to respond like I did on that hot August day in my Indiana cornfield to my son. I don't think society will accept that kind of answer from this industry, nor from people who have trained themselves to address these kinds of questions. In fact, one of the major disappointments I had in government was how little interaction there was between the scientific community and policy makers as we developed policy decisions. I'm not sure why that is, but I did recognize that industry could influence the political process to at least ask the right questions. From my producer's viewpoint, it is our responsibility to make sure that happens. Beyond that, though, it is the scientific community's responsibility to be prepared to provide the answers. Short of that we're going to only have the political answer based on public perception created by the activists.

One final point I would make, and it was one I referred to briefly in my introduction. This is an issue that is going to be very difficult to work with, even more so than most all of the environmental issues. This scares me a bit because at least with the environmental issues I know we can get some fairly objective science to help us in policy decision making. In my limited understanding of the animal welfare issue, though, I wonder if we can realistically expect the same thing. I raise this point because it is, at least at the political level, still very easy to emotionalize environmental issues. That raises the question in my mind, isn't it going to be even easier to emotionalize the animal welfare issues? I'm not certain what the answer to the question is, but intuitively I find myself answering in the affirmative. This is a very value-laden issue that gets into the “rights to exist” question—not unlike the endangered species issues that we are dealing with. And I think we've already seen the public bias expressed here. That's what makes me very uneasy and I think very broadly defines the real challenge we have to address.

In closing, one more story about kids—my favorite subject. Kathy and I have observed in raising children that learning doesn't necessarily occur evenly, one day at a time. We've been through four teenagers now, and with teens you find that there are times when you can talk and talk and they don't listen. Then there are those moments when things seem much clearer to them than even moments before. For example, it's late at night and you've just gone to bed. The phone rings. On the other end of the line is a faint, feeble voice that proclaims, "Dad, could you come get me? I've had a little problem." So you get out of bed, get dressed, muttering the whole time, and go and pick them up. It's on that long ride home when they have no choice but to listen to what you have to say. That's what we call in our household the "teachable moments" of life.

Occasionally we have the same experiences within society. I've seen it happen with the environmental issues. I don't think we're to that moment on the animal welfare issue quite yet where a number of forces come together all at once and we force communication and decision making in a crisis setting. But I do know if we ignore the issue, like we did some of the environmental concerns when they were developing, and avoid allowing ourselves to mature, to be ready and prepared to address the concerns that society is putting forth, then we set ourselves up to be the child instead of parent whenever the teachable moment finally arrives.

I don't think that is a position we want to, or need to, put the animal industry in. It seems to me we can do far better. And we will as long as we at least have available the facts we need—not just to defend a position—but to guide the policy process away from pure political decision making. Because, from my experience, I don't think we have the numbers or the power to win much of anything.

So, on that positive note, I'll end my commentary on animal welfare. Clearly it's a difficult issue area, but I look forward to watching you make progress as you work your way through the political minefields. Thank you for the invitation to speak.