
OVERVIEW AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

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It is my pleasant duty to furnish some remarks to close a unique and historic conference and workshop on food animal well-being. My comments will be confined to two broad areas: an assessment of the current U.S. situation with respect to food animal well-being and a summation of the broad goals and programs that the conference workgroups suggested be established by the scientific community and the food animal industries to address animal well-being issues and public concerns.

But first, I must thank the speakers for their well-prepared and balanced presentations, which established the quality and tone of the subsequent workgroup deliberations. The chairpersons of the workgroups should also be recognized for their expert and thoughtful contributions to, and skillful leadership in, establishing consensus among the diverse members of their workgroups. And finally, as participants you rose to the challenge of a difficult task and provided collective guidance to address serious and sensitive public issues from the vantage point of the special expertise that each of you possesses.

An assessment of the current U.S. situation, gleaned from the presentations and workgroup discussions and tempered by prior knowledge, may be summarized in several general points. Without doubt, U.S. animal agriculture will be shaped in part in the 21st century by food animal well-being issues. While this is inevitable, a window of opportunity exists to stay in front of these issues as they mature and are publicly resolved. By their own actions and leadership, U.S. animal agriculturalists can still substantially influence the impact of animal well-being issues on their industries.

A similar situation exists for scientists using farm animals for food and fiber research. Well-being issues in the scientific community must likewise be addressed, if investigators wish to remain free to pursue their research uninhibited by onerous constraints, while still being cognizant of and compliant with animal well-being considerations.

Our scientific knowledge base related to food animal well-being is inadequate and must be expanded in the near future. This is the decade to obtain needed scientific information; the year 2000 will probably be too late for new studies to have a major influence on public policy and on decision-making. Animal researchers must identify critical knowledge gaps and fill these voids. More fundamental research studies are badly needed on measures of and factors affecting animal well-being; applied studies related to modern farm animal production are equally crucial.

Our standards for food animal well-being will ultimately be evaluated through perceptions of the general public. Industry-wide standards should be scientifically based and consistent with good husbandry to the greatest extent possible. The best and most complete scientific information should be available for public assessments. However, the ultimate value judgments used in assessing our animal production methods and practices will not be decided by the animal industries, the scientific community, or animal welfare organizations, but by society at large.

As one looks across and views the efforts and programs of the food animal industries, the agricultural research community, and the government, one must conclude that a well-integrated and nationally coordinated plan to respond to the public concerns about the well-being of farm animals does not currently exist. While many good, independent commodity-oriented activities are occurring singly, they are not well linked across all the animal industries. Even the efforts of animal protection/welfare organizations are not well focused in this area. Now is a pivotal time; a broad initiative with proper leadership to address animal well-being issues from the perspective of the food animal industries ought to succeed.

Perhaps most of us participating in this conference could agree with this assessment of the current situation. Furthermore, we have collectively stated that animal well-being issues ought to be addressed in a manner consistent with sustaining a viable animal agriculture while satisfying public concerns, providing the food and fiber needs of our citizens, and ensuring environmentally sound production systems. How do we do this? Your workgroup sessions have provided excellent guidance by suggesting the following actions be taken.

Foremost in our discussions has been the need for a comprehensive strategy (a game plan) to address effectively critical food animal well-being issues and concerns. Such a strategic plan should be national in scope and be inclusive, not exclusive. It should build linkages and foster cooperative efforts among producers, scientists, animal protection/welfare organizations, consumers, and government. While we should study the situation in other countries, it should be a distinctly American action plan tailored to U.S. situations and concerns. Of course, national coordination and leadership, primarily from animal industries but also from scientists, will be essential. Our conference/workshop has suggested the important elements of such a plan.

First, a larger research investment will be needed, and that research effort must reach beyond production efficiency criteria. Critical research needs must be identified and prioritized. Research funding must be targeted to underwrite the necessary well-conceived and well-designed studies to answer those needs.

Second, education of and communication among the stakeholders will be of paramount importance in the future. A small segment of society owns and husbands food animals, but most of society has special interests, as consumers and animal lovers.

Third, acceptable minimum standards of husbandry related to animal well-being should be established and maintained by each of the food animal industries. Specific science-based standards should be developed through industry leadership; politically imposed legislative standards should be avoided wherever possible. Industry-directed policy and guidelines focusing on self-regulation should be maximized; legislatively mandated regulation should be minimized and confined to special areas demanded by the public.

Fourth, farmers and ranchers must be provided with the appropriate tools to continue to develop animal-friendly systems. They must be able to ascertain which housing, husbandry, transport, and management practices affect well-being in positive and negative ways and the magnitude of those influences. Future research will be the key to this effort.

Fifth, for a workable and nationally coordinated strategic plan, alliances must be forged among the producer organizations, the scientific community, animal protection/welfare organizations, and government to work for these common objectives.

As participants, you have given us a basis and origin point for mobilizing a national effort to respond to and address animal well-being issues on a cooperative and coordinated basis. We hope to publish the detailed reports of the presentations and workgroup deliberations in fall 1993 and distribute them to you at that time.