



DISPELLING THE MYTH: ANIMAL WELLNESS IS JUST AN ADDED COST WITH NO BENEFIT

The livestock and poultry industries work hard to implement practical and commercially viable standards of animal care and to demonstrate that implementation through audits and certification. The decisions that livestock and poultry producers make with respect to animal welfare ultimately determine the living conditions of the animals in their care.

Decisions on animal wellness are not made in isolation but are interwoven with the vast number of other decisions a producer has to make every day.

The decision-making process is influenced by several voluntary practical or personal motivators but may also be constrained by factors outside of the control of the producer including legislation, customer specifications and market prices.



According to Dr. Temple Grandin, building a culture of animal wellness starts with understanding that both good animal health and good animal welfare are essential components of wellness. Building a culture of animal wellness requires taking a complex topic and providing practical, simple approaches by following a straightforward hierarchy to address welfare issues.

A positive culture of animal wellness exists when managers, employees and contracted service providers work to ensure the general health, welfare and well-being of the animals in their care. It also considers an interaction with the three major components of sustainability for a supply chain:

- > Economic viability (each member of the supply chain must be able to make a living)
- > Social responsibility (includes animal welfare)
- > Environmentally sound practices

Sometimes there are tradeoffs between the three components of sustainability that can lead to debates about different practices.

ECONOMIC VIABILITY AS A MOTIVATOR

Many major retailers source only from suppliers who demonstrate animal wellness compliance, so it becomes a wise business decision. Most assumptions are that a producer is only or mostly motivated by economic goals to ensure continued livelihood, providing an income and ultimately profitability. While producers are motivated by many factors, even if this assumption were true, a decision to implement some measure of animal welfare that results in a longer, healthier productive life of the animal could be viewed as an economic benefit to the producer but also as a benefit to the animal.



Gaining market access to product premiums is a very strong motivator. However, producers may decide to implement or eliminate a practice to improve animal welfare and then bear the cost of demonstrating that through audits and certification only if the cost was offset by a sufficient increase in returns.

Decisions that are motivated by protection of property and, arguably, economics may always be contrary to some desired outcomes of animal welfare. An example is branding of animals, even when it is not a legislated requirement, as a means of identifying them in the event of theft knowing that it causes some degree of animal pain.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AS A MOTIVATOR

Do producers have motivators that have nothing to do with the profitability of the farm business? Of course they do. Producers indicate that there are several things they consider as being key values that impact their decision-making and that motivate a producer to implement animal welfare practices. Producers want to (Hansson, 2015):

- “Feel good”
- Raise animals by “doing the right thing”
- “Avoid suffering”
- Have “animals feel good”



The type of animal, length of productive life, nature of the interaction with the animal and degree of attachment forged between the human and the animal can have a significant impact on personal motivators.

Implementing an animal welfare program may also be based on motivators for the human component such as an improved work environment and employee satisfaction and commitment. Practically speaking, this can result in lower employee turnover which has an additional economic benefit.

Producers can be motivated by what others think of them. This can include a desire to justify animal production and maintain lasting business and customer relationships. Let's say that a producer decides to implement some practice to improve animal welfare that ultimately improves the animal's living conditions and comfort. This can result in an improved perception by customers, consumers, inspectors and auditors because it provides evidence to an external audience that the animals are well kept.

Ultimately, if the producer's customer believes this, it may circle back to improved profitability through increased sales. If it only results in the same amount of sales, but there was an added cost to implementing the practice, this would seem to be contrary to the motivation of economic goals. The practical argument here is this: If the customer does not believe that a producer's animals are well treated, then there is a risk of zero or reduced sales and thus, it can also be viewed as a decision made for economic reasons.

ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND PRACTICES AS A MOTIVATOR

The perceived direct link between animal welfare and environmental welfare can lead to an incorrect assumption that implementing a specific measure to improve welfare of one will result in a positive impact on the other.



Consumers who demand product from animals raised in a “natural” way with provision of pasture, free range, etc. have not considered the impact on the land used for that purpose, the impact on local flora and fauna, or, in some regions, the ability to meet food supply needs for humans.

Jurisdictions have set legislation that limits the access grazing cattle have to natural water sources in order to prevent water contamination. If no other water source is available, this would negatively impact animal access to fresh, clean drinking water. This will ultimately force a decision in order to provide an alternative, the cost of which would negatively impact economic viability.

CONCLUSION

“Doing the right thing” can be a very different thing when considering economic, social or environmental motivators. What drives a producer to implement or not implement animal welfare measures cannot be defined simply. It depends on how an individual producer perceives animal welfare and then relates it to their own personal motivators and values. It may ultimately stem back to why a producer is a producer in the first place.

Learn more about NSF’s Animal Wellness program at www.nsf.org/info/animalwellness or email animalwellness@nsf.org

REFERENCES

1. Identifying use and non-use values of animal welfare: Evidence from Swedish dairy agriculture, Helena Hansson, Carl Johan Lagerkvist, Food Policy 50 (2015) 35–42, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2014.10.012>



NSF INTERNATIONAL

789 N. Dixboro Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48105 USA | **T** +1 734 680 7402 | **E** animalwellness@nsf.org
www.nsf.org/info/animalwellness