

ONLINE ARTICLE

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How will animal welfare expectations impact food production in the next five to 10 years?

That question was the subject of a forum at last Friday’s Victorian Farmers Federation annual conference in Bendigo, one of the rare occasions where representatives of animal groups have met face to face with livestock producers to discuss welfare issues.

The common theme of addresses presented to the forum by Animals Australia, the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare Science Centre was that consumers will increasingly vote with their wallets in favour of ethically produced, welfare friendly food.

Changing community expectations had already influenced livestock production in a number of ways, speakers said, evidenced by the pork industry’s commitment to voluntarily phase-out gestation stalls by 2017, and by the rapid increase that has occurred in the sale of non-cage laid eggs in recent years. 35pc of shell eggs sold in Australia were now produced in free-range systems.

It was also clear that groups such as Animals Australia and RSPCA see a strong future for themselves in providing endorsement to farming systems they deem acceptable from a welfare perspective, such as through the RSCPA’s already established approved farming scheme and ‘choose wisely’ program.

However the question of whether consumers will pay more for products produced to high animal welfare standards was a key subject of debate.

Outgoing VFF livestock president Chris Nixon questioned the capacity of agriculture to fund improved animal welfare outcomes, with beef producers currently receiving 5pc less in real terms for their cattle today than they were receiving 20 years ago.

“You can’t expect us in a first class society to keep maintaining first class animal welfare outcomes if we’re not being paid to do it, because we’re competing against third world countries who do not do this, and that is the brutal reality of the market place we’re in,” he told the forum.

Animals Australia executive director Glenys Oogjes said farmers should work with organisations such as Animals Australia to educate the public about animal welfare practices and to encourage them to pay more for ‘ethically produced’ food.

“As the community becomes more and more aware of (farming) practices, they will start to understand that in order to change those practices and to give an animal a greater quality of life, they will have to pay a bit more,” she said.

“At the moment, I would suggest to you, the animals are paying the price.”

However director of the Animal Welfare Science Centre, University of Melbourne professor Paul Hemsworth, said the issue of whether consumers will pay for additional welfare was “fairly questionable”.

“Research done here in Australia shows they’re not greatly led to paying for increased welfare,” he said.

He said consumers concerned about animal welfare were more likely to engage in community behaviours such as lobbying politicians for change or joining groups like the RSPCA than to change their buying behaviours.

However Glenys Oogjes told the forum she believed consumers were already changing their buying behaviours, as evidenced by the increased sale of non-cage eggs.

“As the community becomes more engaged in understanding of practices that will start to change, and that attitude will more correlate with what they’re going to pay for the products that they buy.”

Summaries of each speaker’s address to the forum on the question of how animal welfare expectations would influence livestock production included:

Chris Nixon, outgoing VFF livestock president:

- Australia spends a small fortune on animal welfare related research and development, and employs the equivalent of 40 full time scientists to ensure best practice in animal welfare;
- It is consumers who ultimately decide the animal welfare practices of agriculture, and farmers are working to align best practice with consumer expectation;
- Australia is the only nation that works to improve welfare standards in other markets such as Indonesia.

Glenys Oogjes, Animals Australia executive director:

- Animals Australia is routinely portrayed in the rural press as being radical and as an enemy of farmers - “The supposed battle between us probably helps to sell newspapers”.
- Animals Australia’s policies were no different to “other respected welfare organisations” such as WSPA and RSPCA, and Animals Australia had no affiliation or association with more extreme groups such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)
- Animals Australia had made itself unpopular with some in the rural community by investigating and exposing treatment of animals that many would prefer had not been exposed.
- Animals Australia had no choice but to take on an investigative role, because industry had known for years about unacceptable practices but had opposed change, largely on the grounds that better practices involved higher costs of production and consumers would not be prepared to meet those costs.
- Animals Australia should not be seen as the enemy of farmers but rather as an ally, as its work had led to Australian farm animals being treated more humanely.

- Australia still has an uninformed community, however if the rural community and animal welfare groups unite they could better educate consumers on welfare issues, and encourage consumers to pay more for products produced according to better animal welfare standards.
- Animals Australia highlights vegetarianism as a valid dietary option because it is an animal advocacy organisation and it exists to represent the interests of animals.
- “If the greatest fear of rural industries is people moving to a plant based diet then the strongest advice I can provide is to ensure your farming practices are humane, meeting community expectations. After all that is the most compelling reason that people decide on vegetarianism.”
- “What is not in dispute is that all animals share the ability to suffer. Surely then the obvious point of agreement we can reach that animals raised for food should be provided with quality of life and legal protection against poor practices”

Paul Hemsworth, director of the animal welfare science centre in Victoria and University of Melbourne professor:

- Animal welfare expectations have impacted on food production and will continue to do so in the future
- Areas where animal welfare expectations have influenced animal production include the voluntary phase out of gestation stalls by 2017, 35pc of shell eggs in retail market now come from free-range systems, while there has been substantial pressure on mulesing and pain relief.
- The question of whether an animal practice is acceptable is an ethical one. Science cannot solve it, but science provides the facts that assist us in addressing that question.
- Techniques used to assess whether an animal practice is acceptable include using biology to look at how well the animal adapts to an environment and to test to assess animal emotions or feeling (“very difficult” but include the use of ‘preference’ tests which allow animals to make choices about what they like or dislike).
- Other considerations include philosophical, cultural or religious views that influence acceptance of practices, and the broader harms and benefits beyond the animal such as the environmental, economic and social outcomes of each practice.
- There are a number of drivers of welfare change, but it is the attitudes of the general public to farm animal welfare that are going to be increasingly influential in influencing livestock production practices.
- Direct influences include consumer attitudes and their purchasing behaviour, and indirect influences will occur through Government making decisions on behalf of community about animal welfare codes and standards that will be set for product by processors and retailers on behalf of their consumers.
- “We need alignment between science and industry practices, which requires industry education and compliance with standards and codes, and alignment between industry practices and community values, which requires public education about the practical reasons for using that practice.”

RSPCA Victoria chief executive officer Maria Mercurio:

- How farmers respond to changing climatic pressures while maintaining a high standard of animal welfare under those changing conditions will be crucial to their success.
- Consumer demand for ethically produced and welfare-friendly food is growing, consumers are voting with their wallets.
- RSPCA's approved farming scheme and "choose wisely" initiatives are part of the response to this consumer pressure.
- It makes "good business sense" for farmers to continue to respond to this pressure.
- Many thousands of animals are still subject to poor welfare conditions – layer hens and sows are not provided with the space required to exhibit natural behaviours, bobby calves may be deprived of mothers milk and transported while still unfit to travel, the need for pain relief in practices such as dehorning and mulesing was essential.
- A farm animal's life should be ended humanely as close to farm as possible without it having to endure the stresses of transport, but this was not always the case, with many animals travelling thousands of kilometres, interstate or overseas.
- "The very public exposure of this issue last year continues to resonate strongly with the community and has changed many people's views forever."
- "We are not against farming of animals for human benefit, we are against the harming of animals for human benefit."
- "The wider community, your consumers are also coming around to this point of view and we believe that prioritising animal welfare, and the consumer's right to expect to this, will be one of the biggest influences on future farming practices."