



Western Beef Resource Committee

Cattle Producer's Library

Quality Assurance Section

CL218

Beef Cow Rights and Cow-Calf Well-Being

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Animal production agriculture has been the subject of an increased level of concern over issues such as environment, food safety, and animal welfare. The moral, ethical, and scientific arguments of animal production vs. animal welfare vs. animal well-being vs. animal rights is a complex issue subject to logical and illogical arguments, ideas, and so called facts that make it a subject that will probably be rationalized with a political solution.

Where do man or animals get rights? Rights derive when society as a group acknowledges these rights. Other societies may not decide to give these rights.

The animal rights issue may be complex but there is a simple solution. That would be for us to stand back and look at what we do through the eyes of the average man or woman on the street. What would the public perception be of your operation?

Animal Welfare Laws

Where did animal welfare laws come from and why were they written? In the western world, before the industrial revolution, man's and animal's welfare, in agriculture, were tied together. There was no reward for intentional or negligent, malicious cruelty toward production livestock. Bad owners went out of business.

With the arrival of the industrial revolution and technology, animals became replaceable units in production. This brought about the disconnect between good husbandry and success in business. The abuse or cruelty that occurred brought about the formation of humane societies and the animal cruelty laws. Many states have laws making malicious or negligent cruelty a felony.

Cow-Calf Operations and Animal Welfare

Cattle ranching and cow-calf operations have had a tradition, a way of life, that has always included the symbiotic relationship between the rancher and his cattle. Husbandry means the careful management of resources. It means working with your livestock and taking into account their environment to maintain your family, your livestock, and your livelihood. Ranchers have taken pride in their long tradition of care and husbandry of their animals.

Husbandry includes the welfare of those cattle and is not totally represented as an increase in production. But times have changed on the ranch and in society. Fifty years ago we did not have the current visibility or technical ability.

Redesign or move handling facilities to take the animal's natural behavior into account. Relatively cheap, portable panels and hi-tensile wire fencing now allow relatively easy movement of working facilities so that a cow's behavior and the conditions of the pen can be taken into account.

How we handle our livestock, including sick and down animals, causes animal rights groups to have undue influence over our industry. Cancer eye cows should be treated sooner or culled sooner when they have more economic value and are not an eyesore for the industry.

We need to look at our entire operations holistically. We can't change the weather, but we can improve the cow-calf's ability to survive and do well.

Branding, Castration, Dehorning

Is there a substitute for branding? Not at this time. The time of castration is not only a welfare question but also an economic question in regards to decreasing stress and setback. Earlier is often better to decrease stress, blood loss, and pain; and when there are no flies around. The same is true for dehorning. But you can reduce the need for dehorning through breeding with polled bulls when possible.

Summary

Cattle producers are food producers and need to produce a quality product, a well-packaged product, and a well cared for product. Ranchers need to be able to document this through their records if they hope to be able to profit from this increased effort.



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