

Kansas State Vet Says Beef Industry Doing A Lot Right, But More Work To Do

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MANHATTAN, Kan. – Kansas State University veterinarian Dan Thomson believes that the U.S. beef industry is doing a lot of things right when it comes to animal welfare – but that there's plenty more work to do when it comes to perceptions and realities about animal welfare.

“There isn't anyone in this room who is not concerned about animal welfare,” said Thomson, speaking to attendees at the 2009 K-State Beef Conference Aug. 13. He said that while most producers work in an ethical and humane manner, the industry has not done a good job of educating the non-farm public of standard management practices or of reminding citizens that beef producers are food producers.

Speaking on the topic “Animal Welfare – It's Your Business,” Thomson, who is an associate professor in clinical sciences in K-State's College of Veterinary Medicine, said that concerns about the subject first arose surrounding the use of animals for research purposes. That concern has now spilled over to livestock production for food purposes.

He reminded that there is a difference between animal welfare and animal rights, noting that those who believe in animal rights likely will not be influenced by science.

Despite a well-funded, well-educated effort in this country to get people to stop eating meat, Thomson said that a study conducted in 2007 showed that 97.4 percent of Americans eat meat. That same study examined consumer attitudes about agriculture and farm animal welfare. It showed that several other topics were of more concern to U.S. citizens. In descending order by priority, the responses were: human poverty (23.95 percent); U.S. health care system (23.03 percent); food safety (21.75 percent); the environment (13.91 percent); financial well-being of farmers (8.16 percent); food prices (5.06 percent) and well-being of farm animals (4.15 percent).

“We are more carnivorous than we were in 1990,” he said, noting however that the U.S. percent of income spent on food has gone down.

Thomson said that food in the United States is very close to free. He cited U.S. Department of Agriculture data that show the average citizen in China spends about 34 percent of personal income on food consumed in the home -- almost six times more than U.S. citizens. Russia spends 28 percent of personal income on food consumed at home; and Japan, 15 percent. In comparison, on average, U.S. citizens spend 6 percent of their personal income on food consumed in the home.

The scientist said people in developed countries like the United States come at the topic of food production from a very different perspective than citizens in developing countries. He cited the vast array of choices U.S. shoppers have at supermarkets and restaurants. In contrast, parents in

many other countries on a daily basis deal with not having enough food for their families – let alone a choice of foods.

“I believe our next big international conflict will be over food. I don’t think it will be about oil,” Thomson said.

Although he believes that the industry as a whole is taking good care of the animals it raises, Thomson encouraged beef industry professionals to disarm their critics with these actions:

- Be transparent and do everything you can to educate non-livestock producers. There is no more Mr. Green Jeans on television, so it’s up to producers themselves to educate and advocate;
- Do not engage in inhumane practices and ensure that those you hire treat animals in a humane fashion;
- Recognize that euthanasia is the humane way to handle downed animals;
- Castrate male animals at a young age;
- Dehorn animals at a young age;
- Make sure your animals are preconditioned;
- Work to reduce livestock stress during transport and other handling activities; and
- Be involved in industry groups who are diligently working to represent livestock producers.

Thomson said he believes that the beef industry should work together to form one welfare assessment tool, subscribe to the practices outlined by it and use it as a marketing tool. If the industry does not work together to make this happen, he said, one will likely be imposed by politicians or others who may not be familiar with agriculture production.