farmgate: Consumers Spend Less On Meat When Livestock Is In The Media.

Before recent years the only time a consumer would come in contact with livestock was in the meat counter. But now consumers are more familiar with meat animals, livestock production practices, and are even voting in referenda how eggs should be laid, cows should be milked, and protein foods should be produced. What influence has that had on the consumer demand for meat?

When the media raises livestock production to the point of coverage on the evening television news and investigative reports complete with video provided by the Humane Society of the US, the consumer will be increasing aware of livestock production practices. Since most consumers have never raised livestock or been near livestock farms and ranches, there is no frame of reference of what practices are standard, scientific, and acceptable to veterinarians and research institutions. If the story is on the evening news or 60 Minutes, it must mean that such practices are bad.

What impact does that publicity have on meat demand, since consumers may be eating pork, poultry, or beef in conjunction with the newscast? Livestock economists Glynn Tonsor of Kansas State and Nicole Olynk of Purdue suggest that such publicity has had a negative impact on consumer demand. Their **research** assumes that public information will influence consumer perceptions of meat product quality and that influences consumption. And they believe that animal handling and welfare issues are included in that media information.

The economists looked at media attention given to livestock issues back as far as 1982 and developed an index for animal welfare on beef, pork, and poultry. In the last ten years, the poultry index for animal welfare issues increased 253%, pork increased 181%, but the beef index did not seem to follow animal welfare publicity over time. However, Tonsor and Olynk say it is not proper to assume that beef is immune to negative publicity about animal welfare. Instead beef suffered a sharp increase of nearly 900% early in 2008 with publicity about a downer cow in Chino, California.

Tonsor and Olynk report that while media attention has not directly impacted beef demand over time, as it has for pork and poultry, pork and poultry have suffered on the consumer demand scale. They also found that media articles also influence meat demand for as long as 6 months after the publicity. The researcher report that the influence of publicity is not as strong as that of price and expenditure, but is not economically insignificant. They report that pork demand would have been 2.65% higher and poultry demand would have been 5.01% more without the media attention to animal welfare issues during the period of 1999 to 2008. While beef did not have the long term impact the economists say the consumer food dollar was reallocated to non meat items and that meant all types of meat stood to lose.

The researchers conclude that increasing media attention to animal welfare issues triggers consumers to purchase less meat rather than reallocate expenditures across competing meats. They also suggest that the livestock industry must recognize the issue of meat demand will arise in legislative discussions about production practices, and the need for all species to collaborate in recognizing the challenges and respond to the societal pressures of changing production practices.

Summary:
When media attention is given to animal welfare issues, regardless of the production practices involved, consumer demand softens not only for that particular meat, but for all meats. Over the past decade, pork and poultry demand would be higher, were it not for media attention to livestock production issues. Such attention causes consumers to eat less meat and show preference to spend their food dollar on non-meat items for as long as 6 months after the media report.

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