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Bring science into 'conversation'

Egg producers say doing animal welfare the right way -- putting science in and taking emotion out -- is the right thing to do.

By ROD SMITH

THE vision of the leadership of the U.S. egg industry to create a scientifically based animal welfare program was -- and the willingness of egg producers to embrace the program has been -- extraordinary, according to one producer who spoke about the program to a conference of foodservice and supermarket executives.

The program has added costs of production and management challenges, but it also has been the right thing to do for birds, customers and consumers, said Mark Oldenkamp, chair of the animal welfare committee of the United Egg Producers (UEP).

UEP called the conference to talk with the executives, representing 40 of the major U.S. foodservice and supermarket companies, about the animal welfare program in light of misconceptions about hen welfare that animal activists have been promoting.

UEP represents more than 90% of U.S. egg production, including cage, cage-free, natural, organic and specialty production systems. Hens representing 85% of production are cared for according to the guidelines of the animal welfare program, known as "United Egg Producer Certified."

Basic facts

Oldenkamp, who holds bachelor's and master's degrees in animal science from Oregon State University and is vice president for northwest operations for Valley Fresh Foods Inc., a food producer with 3 million hens in production, covered a number of basic facts about egg production and the thinking that went into the animal welfare program.

He noted that domesticated egg layers have been housed in cages for several decades, about 95% of all layers are housed in cage production systems today and they have been genetically selected to perform in cage environments.

He said a hen lays about 440 eggs in its normal productive lifetime, most eggs produced in the U.S. are white-shelled eggs and there are no nutritional differences between white and brown eggs except for eggs that are nutritionally enhanced.

He said the knowledge about how to care for hens' health and nutritional needs "is very complete."

Oldenkamp then turned to animal welfare directives established in the 1990s for egg production in the European Union that were forced on egg producers, retailers and consumers by animal activists, were based more on personal opinions than science and were not supported by EU poultry scientists.

He said U.S. producers, knowing that animal activists in the U.S. wanted to force a similar agenda on the U.S.

industry, began to develop hen welfare guidelines in the late 1990s.

However, "we wanted to bring science into the conversation to make the conversation more rounded," he said, explaining how UEP created an animal welfare scientific advisory committee of animal behaviorists and scientists to actually develop the guidelines (*Feedstuffs*, April 23).

He said the committee reviewed all available research, visited farms and equipment manufacturers, considered all production systems and recommended the guidelines, including changes in production practices. He said the UEP board of directors adopted the program in 2000 (*Feedstuffs*, Oct. 18, 2000).

Management challenges

Oldenkamp said many of the guidelines were ones producers could implement quickly, but one of the biggest changes recommended -- increasing cage space from 48 sq. in. per bird to 67 sq. in. for white-egg layers and to 76 sq. in. for brown-egg layers -- could not be done "in one step" because it would have required depopulating 21% of the flock due to a lack of housing to which to move the birds.

Such a depopulation would have been disruptive to the markets and a "disservice" to customers and consumers, he said.

Accordingly, the scientific advisory committee permitted producers to phase in increased cage space, a process that will be completed with birds housed in August next year, he said. This will have provided the time producers needed to build new housing, he said.

Oldenkamp said another big change recommended was to induce molts without feed withdrawal, which required time for research to develop and field test molt rations. However, research was funded through UEP and carried out at three universities and on several commercial farms, he said. Non-feed withdrawal molts became required in January 2006.

As of this January, ammonia levels in hen houses must be controlled at no more than 25 parts per million, where levels often were 50 ppm in the past.

Many of the guidelines have created "significant" challenges for management, but producers have risen to the test, making their knowledge about how to care for hens' health and nutritional needs even more complete, he said.

Amazing enrollment

Oldenkamp noted that the program is voluntary. However, for producers who enroll in the program, it's a total commitment, he said.

Producers must implement the guidelines on all company-owned or controlled production sites, must file monthly compliance reports and must be audited every year by an independent third party. Producers must pay for their audits and must pay assessments for the program's administration and for its promotion to customers and consumers, he said.

He also emphasized that the monthly compliance reports are absolutely required to keep one's certification. "These have to be done. You don't receive two notes from UEP asking, 'Where are they?'"

Against all of the changes required and challenges represented, the 100% rule, the recordkeeping and the costs, the fact that producers with 85% of all hens -- 241 million layers -- are enrolled and fully certified is amazing, Oldenkamp said. "We did not think there would be this kind of subscription to the program," he said.

Oldenkamp said UEP's position is that consumers should have the right to choose the kind of eggs they want -- be they produced in cage, non-cage or other systems -- including the right to purchase the lowest-price eggs, which are eggs from cage housing. Animal activists want to take away the latter choice from consumers, he said.

UEP Certified demonstrates how science can be used to support animal husbandry and production practices, Oldenkamp said. "It takes emotion out of the conversation," he said.

Here's the point

SO much for greed. Animal activists generally paint a picture of large-scale livestock and poultry producers, including egg producers, as being greedy -- more interested in making profits than in the health and well-being of their animals.

However, it's a picture that has been clearly "PhotoShopped" when the truth comes out, as happened recently when the United Egg Producers (UEP) brought together an impressive group of foodservice and supermarket representatives to talk animal welfare.

The group learned about the egg industry's animal welfare effort that is not only based on science and the recommendations of poultry behaviorists and other scientists but that has presented certain challenges to producers to house, feed, water and otherwise manage their birds better and to demonstrate that they have risen to the challenges.

This is proven in the money -- the profits -- producers are spending to finance animal welfare research and pay for compliance reports and independent, third-party audits of that compliance and for UEP's administration and promotion of the animal welfare program.

This willingness to sacrifice at the bottom line to improve animal welfare -- and still produce the most abundant, affordable and safest egg supply in the world -- is an important message the animal activists don't tell. It should be relayed to consumers by producers, processors and restaurant and supermarket managers in their consumer engagements and by referring people to www.FeedstuffsFoodLink.com.

