



Los Angeles Times
latimes.com

That's flooring it at SprintSpeed.™

\$79.99
after \$100 mail-in rebate.

The Sierra Wireless USB Aircard® 595U

Sprint ahead

Shop now >

<http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-humane2jul02,1,2612215.story?ctrack=2&cset=true>
From the Los Angeles Times

FOOD

Animal welfare issue boiling

Many firms in the industry have moved to undertake a number of changes in response to customer concerns.

Jerry Hirsch
Times Staff Writer

July 2, 2007

Veterinarian Bud Stuart was delighted when he was given a live lobster by a client as extra thanks for saving a dog — at least until the Santa Barbara seafood lover thought about cooking it.

Stuart put the lobster in the freezer, expecting the chill would anesthetize it. Yet, when he later held it above a boiling pot of water, it was still alive and pinching. The crustacean was tasty, but he now vows "never to bring another live lobster into this house. It was one of the most traumatic things I have done."

Stuart credits the lobster with making him think more about how the food he eats is raised. He no longer consumes foie gras — fatty liver produced by overfeeding ducks and geese — and now "supports in any way I can the humane treatment of food animals."

Americans are increasingly picky about what they eat — especially when it comes to the ways that farm animals are killed, processed, sold and served as food. And U.S. businesses are catching on.

Fast-food chains are changing the way they purchase pork and eggs; chefs are dropping ingredients not seen as animal friendly; farmers and slaughterhouses are changing how they treat livestock; and one grocery store chain is adding animal-welfare ratings to its meats.

Last month, the nation's largest meat processor, Tyson Foods Inc. of Springdale, Ark., said the fresh chicken brand it sold in stores would come from birds raised without antibiotics.

"According to our research, 91% of consumers agree it's important to have fresh chicken produced and labeled 'raised without antibiotics,'" Chief Executive Richard Bond said.

Fast-food giant Burger King Holdings Inc. said in March that it would buy more eggs and pork from farms that gave animals more living space.

Following protests, celebrity chef Wolfgang Puck announced this year that he would eliminate foie gras from the menus of Spago and 14 other fine-dining restaurants.

Later this year, Whole Foods Market Inc., the natural and organic grocery chain, plans to introduce a multitiered rating system on its meat and poultry that focuses on specific measures of animal treatment.

To be sure, animal welfare issues aren't new. For decades, activists have protested the killing of dolphins by factory-scale tuna fishing. The Humane Society of the United States launched its campaign against foie gras production in 1992.

But only in recent years has consumer awareness reached the point that some of the biggest agribusiness concerns have been prompted to reconsider how they raise and kill animals.

In May, restaurant market research firm Technomic Inc. asked 600 people who had recently eaten out to name their top five social issues. Health insurance was first, followed by paying people a "living wage." Next was animal welfare (including the humane treatment of animals), named by 58% of the respondents.

There are still plenty of skeptics.

"I don't think about the animals, I think about eating," said Robert Ruge, a Culver City house painter. Food already is expensive enough, he said, adding that farmers should raise animals in the most "practical" way to keep expenses down.

He scoffed at Burger King's plan to pay a premium for eggs hatched by hens that were given more room to roam. "I'd buy the cheaper eggs," Ruge said.

Change, whether it is in the way meat-producing animals are raised or the conditions in which hens lay their eggs, is likely to come slowly, said Peter Singer, a Princeton University bioethics professor.

"It is too soon to say if these moves will dramatically alter the way America is farming, but they are hopeful signs," said Singer. "It is good that the market is responding to consumer demands."

Smithfield Foods Inc., the nation's largest pork producer, in January launched a 10-year transition plan to take its pigs out of the tiny stalls that are now the industry standard and put them in larger group pens.

MBA Poultry of Tecumseh, Neb., has scuttled the system, used by most processors, that electrically stuns chickens to render them unconscious prior to their slaughter. The system has a small rate of failure. But with billions of domestic chickens killed annually for food, critics said, that added up to millions of suffering birds.

The MBA slaughterhouse, which butchers about 15 million chickens annually, now uses a mix of oxygen and carbon dioxide to ensure that its birds are unconscious when killed.

But it's not a concern for animal welfare that is leading Smithfield to change the way it operates 200 sow farms across the United States.

"The decision is based on business. This is what our customers are asking for," said Dennis Treacy, a vice president at the Smithfield, Va., company.

Restaurants and large customers, including McDonald's and grocery chains, asked if there were other ways to raise the animals, he said.

Whole Foods is trying to address the concerns of shoppers by posting its farm animal standards online.

Cattle and buffalo, for example, must live on the range for at least two-thirds of their lives. Calves raised for veal must be housed in groups, and restrictive tethering is prohibited. Lamb must be pasture-raised.

The Austin, Texas-based grocery chain is developing a third-party auditing system that will make sure that farms and slaughterhouses adhere to its rules. At its new London store, Whole Foods is experimenting with a five-level rating system for its meats that it plans to unveil in the U.S. later this year.

The "Benchmark" level, at the bottom end of the scale, will represent its current standard. The ratings will progress up to an "Animal Compassionate Gold Standard," for meat processed according to the most stringent animal welfare and compassionate slaughter methods.

Fran Chamberlain, a Culver City graphics designer who describes herself as someone who likes to "eat with a conscience," welcomes such a system. "I tried for a while to find sources of compassionate meat in the United States but I grew frustrated and gave up," she said.

Miami-based Burger King, with 8,500 U.S. restaurants, was prompted to change its practices for purchasing eggs and pork by an outside committee on animal welfare.

It wants to buy 10% of its pork from growers who give their hogs more room. It also has begun to buy eggs from farms that raise cage-free hens. Most of the U.S. egg industry crowds hens into cages that give each animal a floor area about the size of a sheet of notebook paper.

Kay Johnson of the Animal Agriculture Alliance, an Arlington, Va., nonprofit group that represents farm industry interests, says these companies are reacting to animal-welfare activists rather than consumer sentiment.

But others consider such moves a major shift. "There is a real tidal wave of progress," said Paul Shapiro of the Humane Society. "Animal welfare is reaching a tipping point."

jerry.hirsch@latimes.com

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2007 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

PARTNERS:

