

Farmers face dilemma: Animals as meat or pets?

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GRAND RAPIDS -- Farmers who raise animals for food have a real image problem. Children have cribs filled with stuffed animals. Adults refer to their pets as children, spending millions annually on surgeries and cancer treatments, and donating to animal-welfare charities. And, as evidenced by the billions of pounds of beef, cattle, livestock and dairy products consumed every year in the U.S., most of them can't get enough chicken nuggets, T-bone steaks and Thanksgiving turkey.

"Most consumers are profound hypocrites," Wes Jamison said. "They want to have their meat and take it to the vet, too." Jamison, a University of Florida public relations researcher and professor, spoke Wednesday at DeVos Place to an estimated 200 farmers gathered for the 88th annual Michigan Farm Bureau convention, which concludes Friday.

His talk, titled "Public Relations Strategies for Dealing with the Animal Welfare Issue," offered no strategy, save one: that farmers "come up with a moral basis of why what you do is the right thing to do, in the right way."

"If you don't address this as agriculturalists, nobody's going to do it for you," Jamison said. "There is no ad campaign that is going to solve this for you."

Farmers face environmental, legislative, labor, market and import issues, on top of what has become a moral issue.

Jamison traced the growing clash between farmers and animal rights activists to urbanization, anthropomorphism, the theory of evolution and equal rights.

"We've gradually taken away the distinction between humans and animals, and now, farm animals," he said. And farmers, he said, are "in the middle of a hornet's nest of contested meanings."

His advice? Overhaul the image of those who raise animals for food.

That means presenting the truth of the industry in a matter-of-fact way, he said. For example, while class trips for children to farm operations are nice, "you're not taking Mrs. Johnson's third-grade class to the kill-room floor, are you? Why? Because we intuitively know society has changed, and we try to hide what we do from society," he said. "We need to reassert our right as agriculturalists and say we're proud of what we do. We need to say 'You know what? It takes the death of something for you to live, and we are unashamed.'"