

EDITORIAL: Husbandry, Welfare, and Consumer Perception of the Dairy Industry

The unique amalgam of ethical and prudential concerns known as "animal husbandry" is as old as dairy farming itself. As the Bible plainly evidences, exemplary care of animals was seen in antiquity as both good sense and as an ethical obligation towards the animals upon whom one's livelihood depended. So powerful a notion was the husbandry obligation that it was used by the Psalmist in the 23rd Psalm as a metaphor for God's treatment of humans—"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Recent research has confirmed a point that was patent to agricultural common sense: If one wishes to receive maximum yield from one's milk cows, one ought to treat them with tender loving care. As Seabrook showed in 1981, for example, the variable that correlates most significantly with milk production is the personality of the herdsman, and women, being generally gentler in animal handling, make the best herdsmen.

Husbandry (a word derived from the Old Norse "hus/bond," bonded to the house), was historically taken for granted by both agriculturalists and society until the mid-20th century, when revolutionary technological changes enabled some branches of animal agriculture to substitute industry for husbandry, and to make efficiency and productivity more important than optimal care. The dairy industry in Colorado and certain other states, however, are still strongly based in husbandry, with farmers knowing--and caring for and about--the individual animals in their herds.

Historically, and still today, no branch of agriculture instantiates husbandry and farmer concern for their animals in the public mind better than dairy farming. This, in turn, favorably disposes an ever-increasing urban public towards milk production. The images of "Bossy" or "Elsie" happily chewing her cud is a cliché, often depicted in cartoons and other popular cultural outlets, and the Carnation company has indelibly stamped an entire generation or two with the pastoral picture of "contented cows." In the face of ever-increasing social concern about animal treatment, concern that has already resulted in legislation regulating animal use in biomedical research in the U.S., and in legislation regulating animal agriculture in Sweden, Switzerland, Britain and elsewhere in Europe, the dairy industry would be wise to confirm this image of concern for their animals, not erode it.

The new Colorado "downer" bill, discussed elsewhere in this issue, represents a major positive and proactive step in underscoring dairy producers' commitment to first-rate stockmanship, and I salute the dairy and beef industries for pressing this law forward. But the dairy industry cannot stop here, and must be ever vigilant on various matters of welfare in order to preserve its enviable position in the mind of the consumers. Such issues include assuring that increased mechanization in the dairy industry does not eliminate good stockmanship; developing baseline knowledge of the behavioral nature of dairy cattle, in order to assure that thrusts towards efficiency and productivity do not eclipse concern with the animals' behavioral needs (a major social concern); minimizing the stress of separation of calf from cow; improving animal conditions in dry lots regarding extremes of climate; dealing better with mastitis and lameness; paying more

attention to the problems associated with the shipping of young calves. As in the beef industry, alternatives to management procedures such as dehorning and castration without anesthesia, and using gomer bulls for heat detection should be researched. The industry must also devote attention to educating the public about aspects of the industry that may be misperceived by urbanites, such as the use of calf hutches. The question of BST's effect on animal health and welfare, particularly regarding mastitis, should also be decisively resolved.

In Western society, matters of animal welfare have assumed great prominence. For example, Congress for many years has received more letters, faxes, phone calls and telegrams on animal welfare than any other issue. Furthermore, if society can generate sufficient concern to pass legislation that mandates control of pain in laboratory animals, mostly rats and mice, despite threats from the biomedical community that such laws would endanger progress in health care, it is easy to imagine the potential groundswell of concern that could be evoked about dairy cows, the animal which has been called the "mother of the human race." It thus behooves Colorado dairymen to continue to assure members of the public that the ethic of husbandry is alive and well in the dairy industry.