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CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN RURAL AUSTRALIA

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Where Animal Welfare Meets Profit

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Introduction

The ongoing focus on live animal exports and the Four Corners report last year on the slaughter of Australian cattle in Indonesian abattoirs as well as the more recent footage of sheep being slaughtered in the Middle East has made animal welfare a hot topic for the broad Australian community but for livestock producers especially.

For many producers, concern for animal welfare might be seen as a preserve of the animal liberationists, pop stars and city folk who don't know what really happens on a farm. But it's time to stop and think again. Caring about animal welfare can actually be good for the producer and good for business. Animal welfare is all about the mental and physical well-being of animals. Good *management* and good welfare are well aligned and there are many ways this can help the bottom line.

First of all, let's address the emotive issues. There should really be no debate about the fact that we need to care about animal welfare, but let's just review the reasons why.

Animals feel pain and can suffer

Animals experience a basic range of emotions in much the same way that we do – they are not unfeeling automatons. Whereas a jellyfish can react to a painful stimulus, it doesn't have the organised central nervous system that we have. The livestock that we commonly use in agriculture, *do* however have this same basic hardware.

There is plenty of good evidence that animals are sentient. That is; they are conscious and experience pleasure and pain, fear and hunger, joy and grief, attachments to others, curiosity, fun and play, satisfaction and frustration. This also means they have the capacity to suffer.

However, there are obvious differences. Animals are not as evolved as us so they do not have a sense of perspective. In some ways this is an advantage: they don't worry about what *might* happen, analyse and dwell on things. But animals live in the moment so the here-and-now is all important.

This means that it is their day-to-day experiences which are the key to good animal welfare. If the here-and-now is unpleasant or painful, that is all they are aware of.

Current issues in animal welfare

The *Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)* web-site shows that even the most moderate of animal welfare groups has quite a list of campaigns and issues relating to farm animal welfare affecting all the main animal industries. *Animals Australia*, an umbrella organisation for animal protection groups in Australia who brought us the Four Corners live export exposé, also has a broad range of issues and campaigns – no animal industry is exempt. The *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)* website shows they are still focused on live export and mulesing.



Focused attention from any one of these groups has the potential to be very damaging to animal industries and individual businesses, and the flow-on effects can be huge. Agriculture cannot afford to ignore these issues. And in some cases this sort of attention has given the impetus to find solutions to long-standing problems.

For farming systems to be sustainable, they must pay attention to societal concerns - what customers care about. Vegetarianism is increasing. Figures vary, but according to one source, in the UK, 23% of the population are meat-reducers and 10% are meat avoiders. (Interestingly 5% of Australians *say* they are vegetarians with 2% of them actually eating a vegetarian diet!) not withstanding these inconsistencies, statistics like these are concerning for animal production industries and are at least partly related to concerns about the ways in which animals are raised.

Farming may be a lifestyle to some but it is also a business. Regardless of whether we feel a customer or consumer is right or not, we do want them to buy our products. Some of our export markets, notably the European Union, have very high animal welfare standards which we must meet in order to maintain access to their markets.

Producers ignore community concerns at their own peril. Individual actions can have enormous flow-on effects for whole industries. So every producer needs to consider themselves the representative of their industry. Even if a producer disagrees with consumers' concerns he/she at least need to engage in a conversation with them.

We can look to Europe to see the trends that might affect Australia in the future. In most countries, animals have the same legal status as goods and chattels. However, the European Union recognises animals' status as sentient beings. And in the UK, the Animal Welfare Act (2006) now requires animal owners and carers to have a duty of care to promote positive welfare in their animals. On the other hand, recent research has asked if Europeans care too much about animal welfare in the face of environmental catastrophes and the credit crunch.

Improving animal welfare

Approaches to improving animal welfare have usually addressed either legislation or marketing schemes. In fact, legislation is usually confined to the prevention of cruelty to animals although, even then, it has been argued that these laws do not adequately cover production animals.

For example, the procedures carried out in mulesing would be illegal if carried out on a pet dog or horse. To guide producers towards *accepted* husbandry methods,

codes of practice set down guidelines which, if followed, serve as a defence against a charge of animal cruelty.

The Australian Government is currently working to revise these codes of practice and convert them into nationally endorsed animal welfare standards and guidelines which can then be regulated in a consistent way in each state and territory. The standards set down what *must* be done, and the guidelines for what *should* be done.

Market-led approaches to improving animal welfare place a value on products which have come from production systems with proven high animal welfare standards. This of course necessitates measuring welfare which is no easy task. On the other hand, undertaking various accreditation schemes can open up market access or even bring premiums. In some countries there are premium payments for products (milk, eggs, beef, and lamb) that have been produced according to prescribed systems of management highlighting good welfare. This development is beginning to be seen in Australia (e.g. RSPCA barn-laid eggs, free-range pork) although not yet to the same extent.

The assumption underpinning this approach is that some consumers will pay for what the consumer is concerned about. However, the most concerned consumers, vegans, are not part of the market at all, and not all consumers will be prepared, or able, to pay a premium for animal welfare. Furthermore, it seems that consumer concerns are not necessarily matched by a willingness to pay for welfare, and stated willingness to pay is not necessarily matched by purchasing behaviour. Low priced food and specials override many consumers' product choices.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the European Union strategy for animal welfare aims to raise consumer empowerment on animal welfare and the trend seems set to continue in Australia.

Supply-side solutions

Supply-side solutions are seen as an alternative in which farmers take the initiative rather than being stuck between a rock (regulations) and a hard place (the market). Animal welfare is usually seen as a cost to farms with requirements for greater space allowances and substantial changes to production systems (in the example of sow stalls and laying hens). It is associated with inconvenience – more regulation, more audits, and impositions placed on what can and can't be done, particularly with respect to the housing of intensively managed stock. But a change in attitude from "I've got to" to "I want to" makes the process easier. Improving animal welfare can reduce costs and increase profits, leading to a win-win situation for farmers and animal welfare proponents.



Animal welfare can benefit the bottom line

There are some practical ways that animal managers can optimise animal welfare to reduce costs and even increase income.

The key word here is “optimise”. Requirements for animal welfare need to be balanced by the need to farm efficiently. There may also be other demands, such as environmental concerns or lifestyle/personal needs to consider. Animal welfare needs to be considered in the context of other goals, not in isolation.

Fortunately, simple steps such as these can promote animal welfare, reduce costs and even increase income.

1. Good health management

In general, healthy animals will produce better (consider the high health status of well-managed battery hens, the poor performance of steers with a high worm burden or milk yield depression in heat stressed dairy cows). Mastitis and lameness are both painful conditions for dairy cows which affect income and productivity.

Unfortunately conditions like these require continual attention to management and control is often easier said than done. However, putting in the effort can save literally thousands of dollars in veterinarians’ bills and lift production and efficiency. Remember however: good welfare is more than good health – it is about mental well-being as well.

2. Practice calm, quiet stock handling techniques

Improving welfare by good, calm stock handling and minimising stress before slaughter directly improves the value of the final product. Poor handling has been shown to result in 10% dark cutting beef, and this can be the difference between profit and loss for many businesses. In fact, good stock handling is a must at any time. There is considerable evidence showing that positive stock handling leads to better production. Selecting animals for calm temperament means that stock are less flighty, are more likely to be handled calmly and will be less stressed during handling and therefore physically and mentally healthier and more productive.

3. Minimise, or preferably avoid “mutilations”

Anything that involves chopping bits off an animal is going to be questionable for animal welfare, depending on how

and why it is done (and what the consequences will be of *not* carrying out the procedure). Consider breeding polled animals. Look at the cause of behaviour problems, usually housing or management systems, and fix that before fixing the animal, if possible.

If the procedure is necessary, use pain relief, use an industry approved method and, carry it out in a timely fashion. Delaying the inevitable can turn a small wound into a major operation.

4. Sign up for a welfare accreditation scheme

A welfare accreditation scheme will allow a producer to take advantage of growing consumer awareness of animal welfare and may enable him or her to gain a premium for their products. The extra work is likely to be mainly in record-keeping and a few additional audit requirements.

Depending on the scheme there may be some limitations on farm practices but these will be greater for intensively managed animals than grazed livestock.

Visit www.welfarelabels.org.au to get an idea of the range of schemes available but a good starting place would be the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme or European Union accreditation (EUCAS).

Summary

Producers are the custodians of animal welfare. They already know that good management is good welfare but sometimes it takes another perspective to point out where things could be improved. By engaging in dialogue with customers and the concerned public, farmers can take the initiative and demonstrate their concern and knowledge of animal welfare. The ultimate aim should be to find a balance which optimises animal welfare whilst minimising the cost and inconvenience to the producer.

Good management is an easy goal but very difficult to achieve in practice. There are no easy fixes, no silver bullets. It takes effort and care. But the reward is knowing that you have taken all reasonable effort to promote the health, well-being and production of livestock in your care, and that you have represented your industry well.

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