



..... STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSES MOUTH

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As I write this, we are less than 24 hours from the official first day of Spring! We have already seen the robins, greening up of grass in the lawns, brome in the road ditches and even the wheat in the fields. I have also noticed all the buds on the trees swelling and even some early flowers. I know it got pretty cold over the night, so am keeping my fingers crossed that it did not do much damage. This is one of my favorite times of the year with the new baby calves running around with their tails in the air, the fresh smells of a new beginning. You see the tractors on the ready and the fertilizer being applied. It will not be long and planting season will be upon us. One thing is certain, which seems to be a continual anomaly, we need some rain. Folks it is dry out there again. I know it is still early but we may want to offer up some prayers!

Unfortunately this new season has also brought on some new challenges for agriculture from our antagonists at HSUS (Humane Society of the United States). I am really discouraged to hear that they will be using their vast resources collected from unknowing people, not knowing where their dollars are going, are paying for a full scaled attack once again on animal agriculture. There is word from very good sources that HSUS will be publishing an 8-12 page, full-color paid insert on farm animal welfare on Wednesday, March 23, in USA Today. This is significant because it is the number one U.S. daily newspaper with a circulation of over 2.3 million. The insert will be distributed in several major markets and online.

Their stated goals of the insert include: To raise concern about the care of animals raised for food and to call into question animal confinement in what they describe as the shift from family farms to industrial agribusiness. They go on to charge that "factory farms" jeopardize the welfare of animals, damage public health and harm the environment. Does that sound familiar? That still irritates me as the census shows that in the U.S. there are 2.1 million farms and in Nebraska there were 49,100 farms, 97% of which meet the USDA definition of a "family farm." They are not "factory farms!"

Incidentally, the USDA considers a "family farm" any farm where the majority of the business is owned by the operator and his/her relatives. They leave out the part of how we care for the land, water and animals. Of course the animal rights groups have their definition of a "Factory Farm". Note: I print this just for your information: "Factory farming is an attitude that regards animals and the natural world merely as commodities to be exploited for profit. In animal agriculture, this attitude has led to institutionalized animal cruelty, massive environmental destruction and resource depletion, and animal and human health risks." If you want an organized view of how farms are seen go to: www.foodandwaterwatch.org.

Unfortunately, that is how the people who associate with groups like HSUS, PETA, SHARK, etc. view our farms. If you desire to see a map of all the "Factory Farms" in the US go to: <http://www.factoryfarmmap.org/>. Even though we know this to be false, millions of consumers and especially young people are led to believe that this is agriculture (Big Ag) and we are not seen in a view of being transparent -- and transparency leads to trust. So basically we are not trusted, and groups like HSUS utilize that to their benefit at the expense of our farmers and ranchers across this state and this nation.

The Center for Food Integrity is a group that I follow in regards to agriculture advocacy. They recently conducted a survey that is pretty telling when it comes to consumers versus farmers/ranchers. You can access that survey and learn a lot more about what is driving things like this by going to: <http://www.foodintegrity.org/> According to that survey engagement is important in light of the trends seen in CFI's annual consumer trust research. Sixty percent of the people surveyed strongly agreed with the statement, "If farm animals are treated decently and humanely, I have no problem consuming meat, milk and eggs." This survey should tell us something, and more importantly should be our guide as farmers/ranchers.

Now here is the troubling point of that survey. Only one in four in the same survey strongly agreed with the statement, "U.S. meat is derived from humanely-treated animals." It is obvious that engagement from the food system is needed to close the gap. It's important that we balance the conversation, particularly at a time when consumer trust research shows that while most say they'll consume meat, milk and eggs from animals treated humanely, only 25 percent believe they are. That means 75% of those consumers surveyed believe we do not!! We have to tell our story and we should have started years ago. As I have repeatedly said – before someone else does, and now they are ...and it is not the story we want to tell!

This insert that tells the story in HSUS eyes, is not a USA Today story or editorial, it is a paid insert just like a paid advertisement insert. So, we as an industry should not target USA Today for the information of the insert. We cannot afford to shoot the messenger. Instead we need to be prepared as questions may arise in discussions we might have. The silver lining in this cloud is that it does give us a chance for engagement and for dialogue. Remember a balanced conversation utilizing the science based information around the production practices that we routinely employ is a key element to the discussion. We were not proactive in this matter. We should not now in desperation become reactive, and especially not antagonistic. We have to play with the cards dealt us. Unfortunately because we have not done enough as farmers and ranchers to be AgVocates and not do the things we should, our detractors now hold the commanding hand in this card game. I don't see this as a poker game that we can afford to lose. We as an industry must unite, we must join groups that can help protect and lobby for us. There is strength in coalitions and organizations that have similar interests – join them!

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer, which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or Nebraska Extension. For more further information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, Nebraska Extension Educator for Webster County in Red Cloud, (402) 746-3417 or email: dlienemann2@unl.edu or on the web at: <http://extension.unl.edu/statewide/webster>