I was in Kearney for the Nebraska Extension Fall Conference this past week when I received several phone calls and emails about what was happening in and around the Meat Animal Research Center. It seems that the USDA had invited HSUS (Humane Society of United States), ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), and the Animal Welfare Institute among other groups to tour the Meat Animal Research Center at Clay Center. Apparently this was done to demonstrate “transparency” after the fallout from the NY Times story and subsequent investigation. A spokesman for the U.S. Department of Agriculture said that last week’s tour and listening session at the U.S. Meat Animal Research Center was held to “start a discussion with groups that reacted strongly to allegations of livestock abuse leveled at the facility earlier this year.” I guess that I don’t understand why they would invite these groups, because anyone that has dealt with them should know that they would not just sit there and be part of constructive dialogue and verify what is being done is correct and animals are treated in a humane manner, because in their collective minds we in animal production cannot do anything right. It is common knowledge that they have an agenda that is not friendly or conducive to animal agriculture! This became apparent pretty quickly, because prior to event there were several reports of activity by an off-shoot animal rights group known as SHARK (Showing Animals Respect and Kindness) in the Clay Center area around the Meat Animal Research Center (MARC). There were also a drone and at least one helicopter, likely seeking to capture video footage of the center and area livestock facilities that were observed, as well as increased road traffic of unknown vehicles and people. Of consternation to me is that there has also been reported trespassing in livestock operations. There was an unexplained fire out in the middle of the MARC grounds, buildings entered that have never had issues before, and vehicles that have gone onto the grounds that should not have been there. There was also a black van that had a very visible drone inside.

What makes me the angriest is that Kissinger’s R Lazy K feedlot reported that gates were opened inside the feedlot, allowing animals to roam the yard and mix. These groups call themselves animal welfare activists, but yet with these actions endanger the health and welfare of the cattle, created stress for them and I was told that it took four days for the feedlot to sort the animals. That means a big loss of time, gain and revenue to the lot. So much for showing animals respect and kindness!!! Don’t think for a minute that these activists will not make visits to other livestock facilities all across South Central Nebraska. They will want to get as much “bang for their buck” as possible and will most likely try to extend their agenda while they are here, so I would suggest that small and large feedlots and are livestock producers be vigilant.

While it is legal for folks to take pictures and protest from public access areas, you should contact local law enforcement immediately if anyone is trespassing or you feel threatened. Obviously diffusing any situation is the primary concern, but if you are directly targeted by these groups, I concur that you should first contact your local law enforcement but then also contact “We Support Ag’ group by calling 308-631-2165 or ansley@wesupportag.org. I also suggest that you get ahold of the Nebraska Cattlemen office by calling 402-475-2333. I know they are interested and willing to help in any way they can.

For you that do not know what precipitated this, you may recall that in January 2015, Michael Moss, a writer for the New York Times, whom I may add has a history of sensationalism as it relates to food and animal agriculture, wrote an article alleging inhumane practices at the U.S. Meat Animal Research Center (USMARC) in Clay Center, Nebraska. In response, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of the Inspector General (USDA OIG) began a review of USMARC practices and overall operations. An Interim Report of this review was released several weeks ago. Despite the USDA affirming it stands behind USMARC’s protocols and scientists, the article, “Animal activists condemn USDA interim report on Clay Center,” released last month by the Lincoln Journal Star, included only the perspectives of critics. The article even quoted Wayne Pacelle, President and CEO of HSUS – an organization dedicated to ending animal agriculture – without a single account from a Nebraskan employed or impacted by USMARC. And now this? Which I think is a slap in their face.

Those individuals who work and dedicate themselves daily to the work of MARC and to the animals they attend have to feel like nobody appreciates or understand what they do. They are probably wondering why people are not supporting what they do. I guarantee that I do, and that I have nothing but respect and awe for what they do and what they are accomplishing and have accomplished in the past to make us more effective, productive and at the same time in a quality assured manner. I know a lot of the folks that work there and know where their hearts are, and feel their passion and their pain when they are accused of things without being able to properly tell the real story of what goes on there. I also know that MARC is quite literally the envy of agricultural researchers and educators worldwide. I have had the opportunity to talk to many people and when they know I live and work close to the center - quite honestly - I have heard nothing but good and appreciation for what is accomplished there. It has made me proud to work with and to be close to the proximity of the Center!

I think it needs to be pointed out that the research at MARC is a cooperative effort between producers, veterinarians, scientists, and other stakeholders to improve animal health and food safety, and the contention that their practices are anything less than humane has no basis in reality. Ignoring science and refusing to embrace agriculture research will only result in putting growers of all sizes out of business and increasing the cost of food. Don’t be fooled by these groups!