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NEWS

The Humane Wars Battle Lines Are Drawn Over Animal Welfare



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The camera opens on a herd of Black Angus cattle huddled in a cold, snowy lot. A square-shouldered cowboy strides out in a tan duster, black cowboy hat and jeans. In his right hand he's holding a bottle of Yellow Tail wine. With his chin jutted out and shoulders pulled back, he stares straight into the camera. He's serious.

The man is Troy Hadrick, and here's what he says as he faces the camera: "I'm a fifth-generation United States rancher in South Dakota. I recently found out that Yellow Tail wine is going to be donating \$100,000 to the wealthiest animal rights organization in the world, the Humane Society of the United States, a group who is actively trying to put farmers and ranchers out of business in this country. That being said, I cannot and will not support a company who's doing such a thing."



Troy Hadrick's strong stand against the HSUS has emboldened others in ag to take more public positions on animal welfare. (DTN/Progressive Farmer image by Adam Jahiel)

Hadrick holds the bottle high, turns it upside-down and lets every last drop pour out. When the sound of the wine splashing onto the ground ends, he asks the viewer to do the same as a show of support for American agriculture. It's a video that had over 15,000 hits as of this writing. More importantly, it created a backlash so strong that Yellow Tail promised publicly it would make sure its contribution was directed to HSUS' animal rescue efforts only.

The man who labeled Yellow Tail as "Yellow Fail" on his YouTube video is just 33 years old. Hadrick is part of a new generation of livestock producers willing to step up and sound off about the issue of animal welfare. Some are doing it in blogs, some tweet, some have Facebook pages, some speak locally. Whatever the medium, they seem to have two things in common: They are all mad, and on a deeper level, they are all scared.

"We're tired of getting beat up on, and we're tired of people saying we abuse our livestock or that we're ruining the environment," says Hadrick. "This strategy where we do nothing in the face of attacks isn't working. It's time to stand up and be a part of the conversation."

There's a lot at stake, depending on the outcome of that conversation. The USDA puts America's farm workforce at 3 million. Two million of those are self-employed farmers and unpaid family members. Net farm income for 2010 is projected up nearly 12 percent from 2009, hitting the \$63 billion mark. It all adds up to a lot to lose, both for an industry with huge investments in infrastructure, and for farms and ranches, where for generations families have enjoyed a lifestyle few want to see challenged.

AN OPEN DIALOGUE

Traditionally, when agriculture comes under attack the reaction tends to be to create another task force and discuss the issue within the family. Hadrick's approach is more assertive and focused on reaching the public. He believes people need to hear from farmers one on one to understand what's at stake. In 2007, he and wife, Stacy, started traveling across the country, speaking to ag and non-ag groups, explaining what they do and how their lives and their ranch would be affected by over-regulation of the industry.

What has propelled Hadrick and others like him to speak out is a rising tide of negative media reports regarding American agriculture and food safety. Numerous food recalls over the last five years due to E. coli and salmonella have hurt the food industry -- and agriculture as a whole. Animal rights groups have parlayed these fears along with the disconnect between consumers and agribusiness into a strategy for voter-driven

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A BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE

Without a doubt, the biggest, richest and most successful of today's animal rights groups is the Humane Society of the United States. With annual revenue in 2008 of more than \$131 million, the HSUS can afford to focus on several issues at once, one of which it terms "factory farming."

The group used its tremendous resources to roll Proposition 2 onto the books in California. With implementation set for 2015, what happens here bears watching. Many believe it's a blueprint for what other states will have to live with in the near future.

Daniel Sumner, director of the University of California's Agricultural Issues Center, authored a report in 2008 outlining the likely effects of the measure on the state's egg-laying industry. He says while Proposition 2 was written to apply to egg-laying hens, hogs and veal, the latter two were just sideshows.

"This was really all about egg-laying hens," he says. "California has the fifth largest egg-laying industry in the United States. Producers in other states ship in about half of the eggs Californians consume."

In 2015, Sumner believes that all will change. He says Proposition 2 essentially means eggs produced in the state will have to be produced in cage-free environments. Comparisons of farm-level production costs for cage-free systems versus conventional caged systems point to a 30 to 40 percent higher cost for cage-free. Reasons for the higher cost include increased feed costs, higher hen mortality, higher direct housing costs and higher labor costs per dozen eggs.

"In California, the conventional egg industry will go out of business," Sumner predicts. "This then becomes a proposition not about how eggs will be produced, but about where they will be produced."

California was clearly just a jumping-off point for the HSUS' campaign to redefine American egg production. A look at this country's top 10 egg-producing states is like a road map to where the HSUS either has been or seems destined to head soon. Those states include Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, California, Texas, Michigan, Minnesota, Florida and Nebraska.

So far California, Arizona, Michigan, Maine, Colorado and Oregon have enacted farm animal protection laws. More are likely to follow. There's a federal bill in the house, introduced by Representatives Diane Watson and Elton Gallegly, both of California, called the Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act. It aims to "set a higher animal welfare standard for food purchased by the federal government." There is also a proposal from the chairman of California's Food and Agriculture Committee to form an animal abuse registry listing abusers' addresses and places of employment.

BATTLEGROUND IN OHIO

While California's voters made their choice and will have to live with it, there's a lot of fight left in America's heartland. Many in agriculture are intensely focused on the bull's eye painted squarely over the state of Ohio by the HSUS. Ohio is the No. 2 egg-producing state in America and the 10th in overall pork production. The state has 4,100 hog farms, third most in the nation. By all accounts, voters here have no intention of going along quietly with what the HSUS wants.

Last year, Ohio's voters said they preferred animal care be handled by experts in their state with the passage of Issue 2 by a 2-to-1 margin. This constitutional amendment led to the creation of the Ohio Livestock Care Standards Board to develop standards for the care and well-being of farm animals. The board is composed of 13 members, all Ohioans. Included are farmers, educators, researchers, veterinarians, the head of a food bank and even the president of the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals of Cincinnati. This diverse, impressive board may be sidestepped, however, as the HSUS continues collecting signatures to get an initiative on the ballot in November very similar to California's Proposition 2.

Keith Stimpert, Ohio Farm Bureau vice president of public policy, believes his state could be a national leader in the area of livestock care by way of the standards board. All they need is a little time.

"Our record in this area is strong. We rank among the best in the country on the issue of livestock welfare. We have every confidence this will be a tremendous success if it's given the chance to work. The Humane Society of the United States is prejudging the board and they've suggested that while the board is a good first step, it is hollow reform and doesn't get at the core of the issue. I would ask how they know this."

Ohio producer Mark Watkins isn't surprised the HSUS wants to sidestep the standards board. Watkins is part of a family operation established in the 1800s near Kenton. Part of the operation, Rushwood Farms, finishes more than 75,000 market hogs annually. The other part, Watkins Farm, is a large row-crop business, producing corn, soybeans and wheat.

A fifth-generation farmer, Watkins says in his operation they use gestation stalls, something that would have to change if the Ohio amendment passes. The text of the amendment calls for three changes to be adopted within six years of passage. The first eliminates tethering/confining of veal calves, pregnant sows or egg-laying hens for the majority of any day in a way that prevents the animal from lying down, standing up, fully extending its limbs or turning around freely.

The second prohibits the strangulation of cows and pigs as a form of euthanasia,

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adding that all on-farm killing must be done in a humane manner using methods deemed "acceptable" by the American Veterinary Medical Association.

The third measure, aimed at downer cattle, prohibits the transport, sale or receipt for use in the human food supply of any cow or calf too sick or injured to stand and walk.

For Watkins the question comes down to who should be in charge of decisions about animal care. "Should the people who do it and the experts in the field make decisions, or should a politically active group like the Humane Society?"

Paul Shapiro, a senior director at the HSUS, calls the standards in the Ohio amendment "minimal and modest." He says some in agriculture are scared of the HSUS' proposals "because of the dramatically false hyperbolic scare-mongering going on among some of the agribusiness trade groups and the agribusiness trade press. Look at the laws we've passed; it's hardly possible to have more modest laws."

DISCONNECT WITH CONSUMERS

Pat Hord, of Hord Livestock in Bucyrus, Ohio, says changes proposed by the HSUS would definitely impact their operation financially. The Hords have about 13,500 sows and 5,000 acres of row crops. They also feed out a couple thousand head of beef cattle. Hord sees their operation as a mission focused on "feeding families through sustainable food production. We are not just raising a pig, a cow or some corn. We're feeding this country."

Hord says a disconnect exists between what people perceive as proper animal care and what is sometimes truly in the animal's best interest. "There's a debate raging in the United States where a certain set of people we think of as 'animal activists' feel there's a right way to raise these animals; we in the industry have a different view of what that is. In Ohio, the voters got it right when they called for an animal care standards board. We think that's the right forum for this discussion. If that board feels we need to make changes, then we need to do it."

Hord adds he's had experience with penned gestation, a system that does not use crates, and he's not convinced this is what's best for the animals.

"We have both systems, so yes, we can adapt. But a penned gestation system brings with it a set of problems most people don't understand. There's a pecking order with sows, whether there are two or 20 in a yard. They will have to decide who is boss, and these are 500-pound sows. They aren't going to be polite about it. They fight to establish this pecking order and the lead sow is going to eat her share and everyone else's. This isn't a pretty process. This animal is much more socially aggressive than people understand; it's an innate characteristic and not something we're likely to change."

Hord thinks using science to make production shifts is the track on which the industry needs to be. And like Watkins, he's not just concerned about changes in the pork industry, but about the state's poultry industry if the HSUS' amendment passes. He believes egg-laying operations in Ohio would close, possibly hurting feed markets and impacting the area's economy.

Hord says he'd rather see consumers vote on issues like animal care with their purchases. "Ask any farmer and he'll tell you he wants to produce what that consumer wants and can afford to buy. There has to be a balance. At the end of the day people will always need to eat, and we want to continue to be the world's bread basket."

AG'S COUNTERCULTURE

The animal welfare debate is unlikely to end anytime soon, especially considering that even those within the family of agriculture can't agree on what's too much regulation and what's not enough.

Kevin Fulton is a Nebraska beef producer. He started out a traditional row-crop farmer, but moved to organic, grass-fed beef production in the 1990s. Fulton is a well-respected grazer who participates in workshops aimed at teaching others how to sustain grass-based systems.

When it comes to issues like confinement, humane on-farm killing methods and eliminating the sale of sick animals for human consumption, Fulton believes the HSUS is on the right side of the debate. He says he knows his views run counter to those of many traditional beef producers, but adds they are based on his own experiences.

Fulton's shift to a cow/calf and custom grass-finishing business was definitely out of step with conventional beef production, but it was a move he says paid off handsomely. Today about 75 percent of his 2,800-acre ranch is certified organic; the rest is in transition. Fulton, who grew up on a ranch in central Nebraska, says, "We produce beef very efficiently here. We produce more protein per acre in our grass-based system than we would planting corn and feeding it out in a feedlot." It's a production system based on a lean, "humanely raised" product without hormones that people are willing to pay a premium for.

The rancher believes changes in livestock production systems should be coming from within the ag family, but says that hasn't happened. Now, he says, it's time for everyone, including the HSUS, to sit down together.

Fulton says he's met with HSUS representatives and found them to be very open, characterizing his dealings with the group as "100 percent positive."

"I met with top officials from the HSUS, and they bought me a steak dinner. They've educated me, and I've tried to educate them on what's going on out here. I believe if we try to understand them, and they try to understand us, it can't help but be a

positive thing."

He continues, "It's unfortunate that we've reached this point where outside groups have had to step in to stop the insanity. It would be nice if the livestock industry policed their own, but they haven't. We've gone farther and farther down this road, and we've lost all respect for the animals. I believe we don't always treat them with the dignity they deserve."

QUALITY ASSURANCE FROM WITHIN

Many national and state livestock organizations have taken steps to ensure that their producers meet certain agreed-upon standards of care for production animals. Here's a list of some of the national programs and the years they were formed. Most include on-farm assessment programs along with third-party verification and periodic audits.

For Cattlemen:

Beef Quality Assurance, 1997

Transportation Beef Assurance, 2006

For Dairymen:

The National Dairy FARM Program, 2009

Dairy Animal Care and Quality Assurance, 1999

For Pork Producers:

Pork Quality Assurance Plus, 1989

Transportation Quality Assurance, 2002

We Care, 2008

For Egg Producers/Chicken Producers:

United Egg Producers Certified, 1999

National Chicken Council Animal Welfare Guidelines and Audit Checklist, 2000

A WAR OF WORDS

These days, Ohio voters are being fed a nearly constant diet of hyperbole surrounding the issue of animal welfare. The vote may come down less to an understanding of the issue and more to who wins the media wars going on there.

Here, paraphrased, are some of the HSUS' points, from Paul Shapiro:

Animals should be able to stand, lie down, turn and extend their legs. It's hard to be more modest.

Animals should not be strangled to death.

The HSUS is a big tent organization composed of vegans and meat eaters; we are not trying to turn the United States into a meat-free society.

The HSUS provides more direct care services for animals than any other animal welfare group; less than 5 percent of its annual budget is spent lobbying.

The HSUS doesn't exist just to dispense money to other entities. People donate to us for the purpose of conducting our work. No organization in the country runs all the pet shelters; most are run by city or county government. We have never claimed to support or run all of these shelters.

We're in a fight in Ohio because the agribusiness community is unwilling to have a dialogue; instead they fear-monger and lather up the community.

Here are paraphrased points from David Martosko, of HumaneWatch.org:

Very little of the money the HSUS raises actually goes to local shelters; it's less than half of 1 percent.

Over time the HSUS wants to drive up the costs of production to the point where there is a supply/demand imbalance pushing the retail price of protein through the roof.

The HSUS is a propaganda campaign that uses emotion, not facts, to foster change.

We need for the industry as a whole to agree that if one segment is attacked, we are all attacked -- and push back hard.

The HSUS is more about raising money than about raising consciousness. When it comes to fundraising they are clever, persistent and insidious.

The HSUS uses shareholder activism not so much to get companies to change their policies, but to generate press and donations.

LEARN MORE

Animal welfare is a controversial issue, and one that's not likely to disappear anytime soon. Do your research, form your own opinions and become engaged in the debate.

Center for Consumer Freedom: www.humanewatch.org

Troy Hadrick's blog: www.advocatesforag.blogspot.com

Hord Livestock: www.hordlivestock.com

Humane Society of the United States: www.humanesociety.org

Ohio Farm Bureau Federation: [http://ofbf.org/...](http://ofbf.org/)

Yellow Tail YouTube video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCR_J2fWsKA

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