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Striking a balance between livestock, farming

Head believes modern ag practices can use humane animal practices

by John Dempsey Pharos-Tribune

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The business of agriculture is one of the keystones of Gov. Mitch Daniels' economic development plan for Indiana.

Representing a largely rural district, State Sen. Randy Head, R-Logansport, is a supporter of that plan.

As part of that, he is working to remove obstacles for livestock producers while at the same time protecting residents and consumers.

Earlier this week, Head traveled with Indiana Farm Bureau officials for a panel discussion with Hoosier farmers in Randolph County and to visit two farms in Ohio.

"I'm just trying to understand the challenges livestock farms face and address issues before they arrive," the Logansport lawyer said. "There are lots of disputes between farmers and their neighbors when they want to expand. And a lot of times, those disputes are based on simple misperceptions.

"We want farmers to be able to do their jobs, hire people and be profitable and make sure their neighbors are taken care of as well."

District 18, which Head represents, is one of the largest rural districts in northern Indiana. It consists of all of Cass, Miami and Fulton counties as well as portions of Pulaski, Kosciusko and Wabash.

"Around here, I haven't heard many complaints. These are rural communities and most people understand that agriculture is a driver of the economy," he said. "This district is one of the most agricultural there is."

The Ohio farms he visited were owned by people contracted to raise turkeys for Cooper Family Farms. A large producer, Cooper makes its own feed and processes the turkeys after they're raised by local farms.

Often the biggest objections to farm expansions involve confined feeding operations.

"Most most people who oppose building new confinement farms are afraid that the manure will be used as fertilizer and that it will run into streams or that they will not be able to go out of their homes," Head said.

"We need to do it right, do it safely and in a way that doesn't include nuisances to everyone who lives around the facility. I think we can do that using modern farming techniques, not being cruel to animals and still grow the economy."

Yet, he noted, there will always be a few producers who don't do the job properly.

“We need to take care of those who are bad actors. The bad actors are the ones who give good farmers a bad name,” he said.

Head authored a bill during the last legislative session that gives the Indiana Board of Animal Health the responsibility of establishing care standards for livestock and poultry beginning Jan. 1. He believes it will benefit both the producer and the consumer.

“We want people who understand the industry to have input on the standards. The beauty of this bill is that they have to consider anything that would be done on the farm and effect the consumers.”

The state has no defined standards, according to Denise Geher, the public information director of the Indiana Board of Health, and the Board of Animal Health won't develop the standards itself.

“If there were an industry or a group of citizens who propose a change, it would come to our office for consideration.”

Right now, Indiana uses industry standards.

“What we go by are humane euthanasia practices and we look at the American Veterinary Medicine Association's guidelines. That's a good guidance point. We look at the AMVA because its decisions are based on science and research,” Geher said.

“It's a very difficult issue when you talk about care standards. That gets emotional and can be based on what our perception is. What people perceive may be totally different than what is actually the case. You're talking about the livestock production business and what can be reasonably done in an operation. We want to make sure we're fair, taking into consideration the animals and the nature of business. It's very difficult.”

One group the board will likely turn to for advice is the Indiana Commission on Farm Animal Care. Established in the 1970s, it has served as a standing advisory committee to the Board of Animal Health since the mid-1990s.

“It is made up of producers, vets, researchers — a wide variety of people — and they focus on livestock care,” Geher said. “That group was brought in as an advisor to our board.”

One humane issue the commission brought forward was that of downer animals. Downer animals are ones who can't get up to walk on their own. The commission pushed through a state ban on their slaughter in the early 1990s.

“[The commission] has done site visits to understand the industry's needs and give Board of Animal Health members advice on whether changes are needed,” Geher said. “We anticipate the commission will continue and play an even more important role now.”

While he continues to research livestock issues, Head doesn't plan to introduce any new legislation in next year's session.

“We want to let the board work a few years and make sure it works OK,” he said. “Our board of animal health has been around for years, this just gave it added responsibility.”