

## **Animal Agriculture – Animal Welfare; Setting Aside Divisions to Defeat CAFOs<sup>1</sup>**

John Ikerd<sup>2</sup>

I have been a reluctant warrior in the war against CAFOs for more than 20 years – CAFOs being large-scale confinement animal feeding operations. I didn't join this battle by choice rather but out of a sense of duty. While working on sustainable agriculture at the University of Missouri, I was asked by a constituent group to explore whether CAFOs were a logical economic development strategy for rural areas. I had worked for a large meat packing company early in my career and had worked with CAFO operators during my years as an extension livestock marketing specialist at North Carolina State and Oklahoma State University. I came into this controversy without any preconceived ideas about whether CAFOs were good or bad for farmers, rural communities, or society as a whole. After carefully researching the initial question, I concluded they were not a logical strategy for rural economic development – and I reported my conclusions to my constituents. I then found myself in the midst of the “CAFO war,” have been a reluctant warrior ever since.

Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that CAFOs are the epitome of everything that's wrong with large-scale industrial agriculture, completely lacking in socially redeeming qualities. CAFOs pollute the air, streams and groundwater with noxious odors, toxic chemicals, and a host of biological contaminants. They provide ideal breeding grounds for antibiotic-resistant bacteria, such as the deadly MRSA. They incubate dangerous food contaminants such as E-coli 0157:H7 and Salmonella. They are documented threats to public health.

In addition, any economic benefits of CAFOs accrue to a few local contract producers and the giant corporations for whom they produce. The rural neighbors of CAFOs bear the negative health and environmental consequences without realizing any of the economic benefits. In addition, CAFOs invariably displace more independent family farmers than they replace with low-paid workers who move into CAFO communities. Consequently, CAFOs often rip the social fabric of rural communities asunder, essentially destroying any hope for *real* economic development. Furthermore, retail prices of meat, milk, and eggs continue to rise as processors and retailers extract ever-larger profits from the food system.

Finally, animals in CAFOs are raised under conditions that are intrinsically inhumane, which brings me to the main topic of this paper. Advocates of “sustainable” animal agriculture and advocates of humane treatment of animals have been fighting parallel battles against CAFOs.

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<sup>2</sup> John Ikerd is Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO – USA; Author of, *The Essentials of Economic Sustainability and Sustainable Capitalism*, <http://www.kpbooks.com>, *A Return to Common Sense*, <http://Amazon.com>, *Small Farms are Real Farms*, Acres USA, <http://www.acresusa.com/other/contact.htm>, *Crisis and Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture*, University of Nebraska Press <http://nebraskapress.unl.edu>; and *A Revolution of the Middle and the Pursuit of Happiness*, <http://sites.google.com/site/revolutionofthemiddle/>; Email: [JEIkerd@gmail.com](mailto:JEIkerd@gmail.com); Website: <http://faculty.missouri.edu/ikerdj/> or <http://www.johnikerd.com>.

Sustainable animal agriculture is committed to farming systems that are environmentally sound, socially responsible, and economically viable. Sustainable farmers understand that they must maintain the health and productivity of the land and of rural communities in order to be economically sustainable. Sustainable animal producers are also committed to humane treatment of animal.

Sustainable farmers produce grass-based meat and milk and free-range and pastured pork and poultry, and use deep-bedded housing systems that allow free movement of animals when confinement is necessary. Sustainable producers understand that animal welfare is an ethical and social responsibility. They understand also that animal welfare is not an economic necessity, as CAFO advocates proclaim. In fact, mistreating can be profitable. Nonetheless, many sustainable farmers are committed to animal agriculture – just a very different kind of animal agriculture: A humane animal agriculture.

Most animal protection advocates share sustainable farmers' concerns about the negative environmental, social, and economic impacts of CAFOs. However, humane treatment of animals understandably is their primary concerns. They are working to create conditions where animals are allowed to exhibit their innate, natural behaviors, to diminish the inevitable stress of being confined in spaces that restrict movement and opportunities for socialization. They have been fighting to reduce and remove restrictions to animal movement in confinement facilities and to allow farm animals access to the out-of-doors. Animal welfare concerns include painful practices such as de-beaking chickens, castrating pigs, and bobbing tails of milk cows. They are also concerned about the practice of breeding animals for maximum production, which often places animals under tremendous stress. For example, the lifespan of high-producing milk cows has been cut to less than half of normal and broad-breasted turkeys have become “too big to breed.” However, many animal welfare advocates believe the ultimate solution to mistreatment of animals is the elimination of animal agriculture.

Advocates of sustainable animal agriculture and humane treatment of animals tend to disagree on the legitimacy of animal agriculture, although they agree on virtually everything else. There are logical arguments on both sides of this contentious issue. How can any production process possibly be humane if its ultimate purpose and intention is the slaughter of sentient, living beings? How can any system of production possibly be sustainable if it denies the basic fact that all living things survive and thrive by eating the dead carcasses of once-living beings, including sentient beings? There are reasonable, logical answers to each of these questions; the answers are just not acceptable to those who ask them. Thus, the division between animal agriculture and animal welfare continues.

The basic problem with this division is that CAFO advocates have been able to use this philosophical divide to weaken and obscure public opposition to CAFOs. They label proponents of new animal welfare legislation as “animal rightist” who care more about the comfort of animals than the welfare of people. They warn those in animal agriculture that regulations related to treatment of animals are a “slippery slope” leading to the ultimate elimination of all animal agriculture. As a result, sustainable agriculture advocates tend to avoid taking positions on animal welfare issues, not willing to oppose humane treatment of animals and not willing to support those who oppose animal agriculture.

On the other side of the issue, many advocates of animal welfare see sustainable animal agriculture as a “slippery slope” leading to strengthening public acceptance of the legitimacy of agriculture, or at least delaying its ultimate rejection. They see free-range chickens, pastured pork, and grass-based dairies as the equivalent to “greenwashing” an inherently inhumane and immoral system of food production to make it publicly acceptable. Thus, many advocates of animal protection avoid taking positions on sustainable animal agriculture issues, not willing to oppose systems that treat animals more humanely and not willing to support the continuation of animal agriculture.

The proponents of CAFOs have been able to use this “wedge issue” very effectively to confuse the issue and splinter public opposition to CAFOs. Advocates of sustainable agriculture and animal welfare too often become unwitting collaborators with their common enemy. They are skillfully driven into separate camps because they are unable or unwilling to work together on this important issue, even though they obviously agree in their opposition to CAFOs.

If we are to win the war against CAFOs, we must seek and find common ground on which to fight the battles. First, we need to focus on the fundamental problem; not on specific environmental, social, or ethical consequences. The industrial farming system as a whole is the source of all these problems linked to CAFOs, and the solution is not to fix specific problems but to eliminate the system as a whole – to eliminate CAFOs. Second, we need to find and focus on our areas of agreement. Both advocates and opponents of animal agriculture agree animals must be treated humanely, with dignity and respect, which is completely lacking in CAFOs – in fact, is impossible in CAFOs. We also agree that public health is a major concern in the U.S., and CAFOs are major contributors to public health problems in both rural and urban areas.

We must be willing to set our philosophical differences aside, at least for a time. If we can't work together to eliminate CAFOs, we are not going to be able to defend and protect public health, family farms, rural communities, or farm animals. We must be willing to allow time and further human enlightenment to evolve toward a deeper understanding of relationships between humans and farm animals. Disagreements about the legitimacy of eating the flesh of animals are as old as human history. Some people equate animal agriculture to slavery, suggesting that eventually animals will be freed. However, slaves were not freed from the necessity of work; they were simply freed from working under oppressive and inhumane conditions. Every living thing, including humans, eventually dies. What is the work of animals; under what conditions should they be allowed to work, live, and die? Or should animals be free to reproduce, live, and evolve as they will, without human intervention? Perhaps in another century or two, people will either become comfortable killing and eating animals or they will quit killing and eating animals. But, that issue will not likely be resolved in the lifetime of anyone here today.

I like to compare our inability to join forces in the war against CAFOs to people being unwilling to agree to oppose murder because they can't agree about abortion. Some people believe abortion is a form of murder, just as some people see animal agriculture as a form of murder. But, virtually everyone agrees that we should oppose and have laws against murder. They know that murder is ethically and morally wrong, even if they don't agree about every possible form of murder. They know we are not likely to erase differences of opinion about

abortion anytime soon, so they agree to continue disagreeing, while they willingly join forces in opposition to murder. Advocates of sustainable agriculture and animal protection need to agree to continue disagreeing about the legitimacy of animal agriculture, while joining forces to defeat their common enemy: CAFOs.

We need to mount a campaign that is bold enough to capture the attention and commitment of the public in general. CAFOs need be *eliminated* and replaced with a humane system of sustainable animal agriculture. The time, energy, and financial resources of CAFO opponents are being depleted by fighting individual battles in isolated rural communities and lobbying for minor changes in laws and regulations pertaining to CAFOs. Every local battle should be seen as an opportunity to recruit new allies to join the battle against CAFOs. New laws and regulations should be planned and implemented as strategic steps leading toward total elimination of CAFOs. We have a major advantage in this war in that we don't need to mount a propaganda campaign against CAFOs; we simply need to tell the truth about CAFOs. But, we do need to join forces so we can drown out the CAFO propaganda with truth.

The negative consequences of CAFOs are inherent in their specialized, standardized, consolidated, industrial structure. Any economic efficiencies result from reductions in costs of management and labor, which mean fewer quality employment opportunities in rural areas, not more. The negative public health, environmental, and animal welfare consequences of CAFOs are inevitable consequences of concentrating too many animals in spaces that are too small to accommodate the basic health needs of animals and to assimilate or neutralize their inevitable wastes. Community conflict between the few who benefit economically and the many who bear the environmental and social costs are inevitable. The proponents of CAFOs know if they are sufficiently regulated to eliminate their unacceptable consequences, they will not be economically competitive; they won't be able to exist. This is not a war to make CAFOs tolerable; this is a war to eradicate CAFOs.

Advocates of animal agriculture and sustainable agriculture will both face significant risks when they join forces in this battle. Eliminating CAFOs may be a slippery slope toward making animal agriculture acceptable or it may be a slippery slope toward ending animal agriculture. There is no way of know which direction the slope may turn until sometime in the future. But this is a "slope" we must be willing to "slide." Allowing CAFOs to continue for even another twenty years will doom billions of animals to lives of unnecessary stress, pain, and suffering. We simply cannot allow the CAFO system of production to continue any longer than is absolutely necessary, regardless of what comes afterward.

I personally hate using military analogies, such as wars, battles, and warriors. On rare occasions, our human failings unfortunately leave us no apparent alternative. I'm old enough to remember World War II. There was nothing great or noble about it at the time, but I am still convinced it was necessary, even if not just. America faced significant risks in forming alliances to help fight and win the war, but the risks of losing the war were far greater. Some of those alliances had unpleasant consequences. However, I remain convinced that the consequences were well worth the risks. Just think what the world might be like today had we had lacked the courage to form alliances to fight World War II. Then think what agriculture might be like in the future of we lack the courage to risk joining forces to fight CAFOs.

I believe our respect or lack of respect for other living things, including farm animals, is a reflection of our basic ethical or moral character. A lack of respect for farm animals reflects a fundamental flaw in character of American agriculture. Let's join forces and do what we know in our hearts is the right and good thing to do: Let's join forces to defeat CAFOs. The consequences of our failing to do so would extend far beyond farm animals and agriculture, extending for decades into the future. Let's set aside our divisions and eradicate CAFOs.