

Walking the Walk Even More Vital Today

By Jerry R. Harke

Today farmers and ranchers often find themselves answering questions about the care they give to the animals they raise. And most of the time these questions arise after news stories or emotional television shows about an animal abuse incident.

What's behind the drama? To be sure, there have been some cases of animal abuse and responsible farmers and ranchers everywhere denounce any kind of inappropriate treatment or abuse of farm animals.

At the heart of the matter are several activist groups that have long been opposed to modern livestock production. While their direction and purpose generally disregards the need to feed an ever-increasing population, their presence and voice in the news media serves to disrupt that process and, in some cases, bring it to a complete halt.

What can farmers and ranchers do to counter the impact of such activities? Perhaps one of the most basic things is continuing to focus even more intently on "walking the walk." That means doing the right thing on their farms and not leaving one inch of wiggle room that activist groups can use as a wedge issue.

Here's a seven-step process for showing responsiveness to public concerns about animal care on farms and ranches.

First, you follow the latest scientific animal care standards established for the species you raise on your farm. That's a good starting point. Also, when a dramatic incident of abuse surfaces that is clearly the result of shoddy treatment or outright abuse of animals, livestock producers must step forward to hold the responsible party accountable. Without the moral underpinning of humane animal care and doing the right thing at the farm level, sharing any story about positive animal care rings hollow.

Second, be active. Make sure you are active in general farm organizations, such as your state Farm Bureau, as well as your breed or species associations. Making industry connections will ensure you have the latest information on vital issues at your fingertips for easy reference.

Third, make a commitment. Make communicating about your farm a formal part of your business plan. Communicating with consumers is just as important as following the markets and making production decisions. Consumers today not only want to know what you do, but why you do what you do. Set a communications goal and follow through. Start out slowly and build confidence.

Fourth, do your research. Take the time to find out through research on the Internet and elsewhere what critics of modern livestock farming practices are saying. Try to relate their critical observations to what you do on your farm or ranch.

Fifth, establish good neighbor relations. Reach out to your neighbors and non-farming residents nearby and build good relationships. Even if biosafety protocol does not allow visitors inside your barns, find a way to engage consumers, through a tour of other areas of your farm, a cookout, live video-feeds from the pens, a hayride, etc.

Sixth, meet and engage with the public on their turf. Tell your personal stories to local groups. This can include church groups, school meetings, local service organizations, your local chamber of commerce. Focus on your dedication to caring for your animal and providing a healthy product for consumers. Provide examples of your hands-on care. Leave plenty of time for Q&A.

Finally, number seven on the list is remembering social media. Engaging with the public takes many forms today. Face-to-face is absolutely the best way to tell your story, but also consider engaging consumers through opportunities offered by today's social media, such as leaving comments on related Internet blogs, commenting from a high-road perspective on stories critical of agriculture, or starting a page about your farm on Facebook or producing a short video about your farm for YouTube.