Why is farm animal care a challenging public issue?

People view farm animal care differently, based on how much they know about farming and taking care of farm animals. The issues around farm animal care are complex. To understand animal care, you have to understand science – biology especially. This knowledge will help you determine the physical, health, environmental and behavioral needs of your animals (Millman, 2009).

What is the issue concerning farm animal care?

Confinement housing is often discussed. Examples include sow gestation stalls, egg-laying cages and veal crates. These systems were developed to put food on people’s tables cost efficiently. In most cases, these systems follow best practices of research science in treating animals well. Some animal advocacy groups, though, have raised objections.

Some people are concerned that when animals are not allowed to move freely, their well-being suffers. Another concern is that confinement systems limit some natural behaviors, such as pigs rooting and nesting and chickens dust bathing. In response, certain confinement housing systems have been banned in several states.

Is there an ideal livestock housing system?

You can’t tell the worth of a housing system just by looking at it. It is important to consider the whole system, not just its parts (AVMA, 2010). Good animal care considers an animal’s physical needs, health, environment and behavior (Millman, 2009). No single system is clearly better than all others. There are tradeoffs for all livestock production systems. For example, protecting a gestating sow from aggressive animals or reducing competition among pigs for space and feed may require a more confined system. Or, when chickens are taken out of cages so they can roam free, their natural instincts make them prone to pecking, fighting and killing other chickens. In the end, changing an animal care system just so it is more appealing for people actually may hurt the animal (AVMA, 2010).

What else is important to understand about this issue?

Scientists continue to look for new ways to house animals. They must test carefully each new housing option and weigh the benefits and risks to both humans and animals. The well-being of animals in alternative systems should be at least as good as it is in standard systems before mandating a change.

The size or type of production system does not determine the quality of animal care and level of well-being. Animals can do well or poorly in any system. Housing design is important, as is the safe use of any tools or devices that are part of the production system.
Attitudes and beliefs influence how owners care for their animals, so it is essential to have good animal owner training programs that encourage high ethical standards. Fortunately, there are commodity Quality Assurance Programs that can help. These programs first focused on food safety and food quality. Now they also educate owners about animal care and well-being. Many farms already use best management practices, but responsible members of the livestock industry are always looking for ways to improve animal care.

**What is the position of University of Missouri Extension regarding farm animal care?**

University of Missouri Extension’s role in farm animal care is to provide science-based research and information to producers, agribusinesses and consumers. MU Extension is committed to the well-being of animals, to maintaining a safe and adequate food supply, and to protecting the safety and health of farm workers.

MU Extension faculty and staff believe in a comprehensive approach to animal care. We believe that educating those who directly manage animals is the most successful way to improve animal care and well-being. Educating producers and 4-H youths in animal care will continue to be a high priority for MU Extension. MU Extension also can help citizens discuss this and other controversial public issues in a nonbiased way. The goal is to help citizens make informed decisions and carry out actions that are in the best interest of their communities.

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**References:**


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