Animal Welfare and Animal Rights: A War of Words with Casualties Mounting

By Jill Montgomery on behalf of the Animal Welfare Council

The media and public use animal welfare and animal rights interchangeably, but they are not synonymous terms. In fact, the philosophical gulf between these two belief systems and the advocacy efforts currently underway by each group carry enormous implications for true welfare of the horses and for the future of the horse industry. In light of legislation pending on the Federal level as well as in various state Houses, it is imperative that the general public, as well as anyone with an interest in horses as work or recreational animals, come to a full understanding of each philosophy, the methods by which proponents of each carry out their missions, and the implications of each approach for the horse industry and for the animals the industry serves.

Animal welfare is a traditional model that directs stewardship of animals to their best use and humane practices, while setting the value of the animal relative to its benefit for mankind. The American Veterinary Medical Association describes animal welfare as “a human responsibility that encompasses all animal well-being, including proper housing, management, nutrition, responsible care, humane handling, and when necessary humane euthanasia.”

Animal welfare reflects the belief that animals have the right to be handled humanely and to live a life free of pain; however, animal welfare advocates do not believe that animals should have rights equal to those of humans. Animal welfare has been advocated for more than 140 years in the United States. This approach is codified in law at the local, state and federal levels.

The animal rights movement is a relatively new ideology that embraces the philosophy that an animal has rights and that those rights are equivalent to those of humans. Animal rights activists reject the use of animals for any purpose, whether or not the animals are treated humanely. Animal rights activists do not believe that animals of any type should be used in research, sporting events or entertainment venues, or as food. Animal rights activists do not believe that animals should be used as work animals and believe that breeding and exhibiting animals in zoos and conservation parks is a form of exploitation. Animal rights activists lobby strongly for legislative action to further their agenda; in some instances, such action has drastic consequences not only for the livestock industries but for the well-being of the animals. That the consequences are, perhaps, unintended is irrelevant.

Animal rights activists have a heavy influence on public attitudes. The horse industry is currently encountering many challenges, not all of them from the animal rights movement—but all exacerbated by the animal rights movement’s interference. A number of influences, ranging from social ideology to economic recession, have combined over the past decade to create a shift in the traditional use and value of horses as livestock. Wildly fluctuating fuel prices have increased feed and transport costs. Available land for horse facilities is disappearing, driving land costs up. Changing economics make continuing horse ownership unrealistic for many owners. The closing of processing plants has dropped the baseline value for horses to zero, increased the number of marginal horses on the market, overloaded rescues
and sanctuaries, and lowered the market value of horses being sold and resold within their useful lifespans. ¹ Yet proponents of animal rights have put increased pressure on an already vulnerable industry by insisting that the humane treatment of a horse be defined as having one unchanging guardian from the cradle to grave, regardless of that person’s capacity to provide ongoing care. Even the change in nomenclature from “owner” to “guardian” implies an enormous shift in attitude toward the rights and duties of animal management.

The “Unwanted Horse” has become a battle zone between animal welfare and animal rights proponents. The American Association of Equine Practitioners defines unwanted horses as “horses that are no longer wanted by their current owners because they are old, sick, injured, and unmanageable (e.g. vicious or dangerous), fail to meet their owner’s expectations (e.g. performance, color, or breeding) or their owner can no longer afford them.” While numbers that encompass all unwanted horses are not well defined, the number of US horses that are exported and processed for food in Mexico and Canada has been widely adopted as a figure that tracks the overall number of unwanted horses. In the US, for 2012 that number is estimated to be 158,657, or 1.7% of the 9,200,000 US horse population. ² This number represents the additional number of animals each year that, absent an option for processing, must be housed in rescues or sanctuaries, euthanized by other (generally more expensive with greater environmental impact) methods, or simply abandoned—and there is certainly no “humane treatment” in this last alternative. In fact, since the U.S. processing plants were closed in 2007, a dramatic increase has been documented in the number of horses being neglected or abandoned, further straining the capacities of local and state government animal control departments. The severe economic consequences of a ban on processing cannot be ignored, and must be addressed.³

How do animal rights activists further their mission? The general population’s increasing distance from agriculture creates an opening for animal rights extremists to sway the public perception of the role animals play in our lives.

The horse is undeniably familiar and beloved, with a universally positive image, but that image is no longer necessarily agricultural; the populist view of horses has shifted from work partner to recreational partner and backyard pet. Those who own horses may identify the animal’s role (livestock or companion animal) by the specific purpose for which they use their animals, but those who do not own horses are more likely to identify them most as companion animals. (Western Horseman Survey 1998)

This perception shift opens the door for the animal rights movement to promote the drive to change the status of the equine species from livestock (part of agriculture’s food and fiber industry) to companion animal. They are helped with their agenda by the simple fact that today a large number of Americans have no direct experience with food production, harvest, or hunting; instead, most demonstrate a disconnected “meat comes in plastic from the grocery store” mentality. To this group, the concept of processing and consuming an animal with which one is familiar is acutely uncomfortable; it seems to violate an unspoken social contract between human and animal whereby the human is obligated at all costs to prolong the life of
an animal deemed a “pet.” The unintended consequences of that belief have not proven to be the best way to protect the welfare of some horses.

It is important to remember that there are laws in place to protect horses now. Following the animal welfare model, laws and regulations have been developed and refined by government process at local, county, state, and federal levels to ensure humane treatment of animals. These address abuse and neglect, set minimum standards for care and custody, and establish owners’ rights for disposition of the animal. Final disposition of horses (humane euthanasia) within the context of existing laws is taken seriously by responsible horse owners and animal welfare advocates.

The public (and some segments of the horse-owning population) may not grasp the gravity of this divisive argument about horse classification and humane treatment. In fact, horses and their owners enjoy many benefits from horses’ livestock status, ranging from federal health and disease programs to property tax considerations. In the quest to further their vegan agenda, animal rights activists would welcome the loss of these benefits, making horse ownership more expensive and problematic, ultimately diminishing some of the very protections that guarantee the horse’s welfare.

The primary tool animal rights extremists use for this approach has been lobbying to propel legislation through emotionally laden marketing efforts. Unfortunately the legislation behind the emotional appeals has not addressed the necessary practical issues, such as adequately funded rescues and sanctuaries, setting capacities and standards of care at such facilities, and ensuring that appropriate options are available for euthanasia and carcass disposal. In fact, it is the animal rights movement itself that has created the problem of unwanted horses; they have raised millions of dollars to support legislative campaigns to ban horse slaughter, all the while providing almost no financial support for the actual care of the unwanted horses their agenda has produced. (Humane Society of the United States spends less than 1% of their $1,000,000+ annual budget for direct animal care"

In evaluating propositions (including legislation) for changing established humane management practices, it is imperative to be aware of the source of offered information and the slant of such material. Discerning the philosophical foundation for proposed laws at any level is critical not only for the survival of the horse industry, but also vital for the welfare of the horse itself.

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