

How to Improve Animal Welfare

Melina Tensen

Kerry Lonergan:

Our first speaker today, Dr Peter Crozier, Director of the Wentworth Group, is unfortunately an apology due to a family death. So our first speaker now is Melina Tensen. Melina is Senior Scientific Officer with RSPCA, Farm Animals. She's responsible for providing the science-based information, advice and comment on farm animal issues to government and industry level. RSPCA is one of the lead animal welfare agencies involved in informing discussion and debate on farm animal welfare practices and management in Australia.

Melina will discuss changing consumer expectations and the impact of increasing scrutiny on production systems, and of necessitating improved animal welfare standards and greater transparency and openness in farm operations and practices. Over to Melina.

Melina Tensen:

Hi everyone, and thanks very much Tony and Jock and everyone from ALM Group for inviting me here today. I'm a viewer of Landline as well Kerry, so you'll be pleased to hear that. The only one in the office actually, but it doesn't matter. Yeah, and I tell them also Kerry, what you say about live exports every week as well. Anyway, having done that little jab at Kerry I'll move onto serious business. So when it comes to animal welfare, the RSPCA is committed to improving and promoting the welfare of farm animals throughout their lifetime. And our objective is to ensure that animals used for the production of food and fibre are treated humanely from birth all the way through to slaughter. At the same time though we do recognise that there's a need to balance animal welfare with the commercial realities of farming practices today, as well as changing consumer demands.

So the last few years certainly have seen an unprecedented amount of discussion in the public domain about animal welfare issues associated with livestock production. And whether this focus on animal welfare comes from animal welfare organisations like the RSPCA, or food retailers or regulators or just the media in general, it really can have significant impacts for industry and create an uncertain business environment as well.

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So this spotlight on welfare runs in parallel with increased interest in other social causes like the protection of the environment or civil rights issues and the like. And from our perspective this is only going to increase in the coming years.

So while the livestock industries might not be able to control the growing consumer and public concern for animal welfare, or the environment for that matter, it can control how it responds to meet the challenges of those concerns. Supermarket surveys, I think, can provide a really interesting insight into what customers or what their customers want. And one of the major retailers here in Australia – you can guess which one of the two that was – found that Australian grown and caring for animals and caring for the environment were included in the top 10 product attributes of importance to their customers. And the same retailer, interestingly, also found that three of the four customers believed that supermarkets should be responsible for ethical sourcing of product – which is an interesting thing really.

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So in needing to demonstrate corporate social responsibility, is it really any wonder that retailers are setting their own standards for suppliers in order to provide for this growing values-based demand of their customers?

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Schemes like Certified Land Management offer a genuine opportunity for landholders to tap into this community sentiment. For landholders with animals in their care this means setting goals in husbandry and management practices that allow

for continuous improvement in animal welfare beyond that which is required by law. Livestock producers must access best practice technologies that will improve productivity, long-term viability and importantly, animal welfare. The aim of certification schemes should be to encourage and drive innovation, and to achieve change and improvement over time in line with developments in animal welfare research. In any certification scheme openness and transparency about farming practices and the goals being strived for are important to help inform and even educate consumers about production methods, and clear on-pack labelling will help those who are willing to pay more for improved welfare standards to do so.

Ongoing verification to monitor progress with agreed goals underpins a robust certification scheme and helps engender consumer trust in the end product. Ongoing verification also provides the impetus for new goals to be set by the producer in line with continuous improvement of on-farm practices. But thought also has to be given to post-farm gate aspects of the supply chain that involve handling of live animals – and I’m talking about transport, lairage and slaughter. So, in short, from an animal welfare perspective, certification schemes should aim to provide whole-of-life assurance that makes a real difference to the animal concerned.

Some in the agricultural industries may perceive community expectations to be an unfair intrusion on their business. But it’s no longer a viable position to view community concerns about animal welfare as simply an issue of city folk ignorance. The industry and producers on the ground certainly don’t always have to agree with such concerns, but ignoring them is not an option in the current climate. Those who put their head in the sand will be left behind. On the other hand, those who see animal welfare as an opportunity to be embraced and those who invest in improving welfare standards within their operations will be well placed to capitalise on the consumer trends here and throughout the developed world.

Thank you. That was short and sweet.

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