

Farmers are more than modern food factories

By John Schlageck

Kansas Farm Bureau

The stereotypical image of the family farm complete with red barn, a few layer hens scratching in the yard, some pigs wallowing in the mud and contented cows chewing their cud in the field isn't commonplace anymore.

Neither is the farm as a sterile, mechanized emotionless "food factory" an accurate picture.

Today, raising livestock on the farm or ranch is a dynamic, specialized profession that has proven one of the most successful in the world. Only in the United States can less than 2 percent of the population feed 100 percent of our population — and other people around the world — as efficiently as we do.

Because our livestock are the best cared for, we can provide such efficiency. Today's animal husbandry is no accident. Improvements in housing, handling and animal nutrition are the result of billions of dollars of private and government research.

Many consumers are unaware of a farmer's relationship with their animals and how meat, milk, eggs

and other food products wind up on their dinner table. Farmers have always enjoyed sweeping public support for their efforts to provide abundant, nutritious food.

But some people do not agree. They are working to convince the public that farmers and ranchers no longer tend their animals but treat them only as food machines. Some people believe that not only are animals confined but most are held in crates and cages and not allowed to move at all.

Animal behavior varies just like human behavior. In some cases livestock are restricted to avoid injuring themselves, other animals or the farmer. All forms of restraint are designed for the welfare of the animal as well as efficiency of production.

As an example, beef cattle in herds or feedlots are restrained generally when being doctored. In cow/calf operations, housing allows for protection from predators and the elements, disease control and ease of handling.

Farmers and ranchers are neither cruel nor naïve. A farmer would compromise his or her own welfare

if animals were mistreated.

Agriculture is extremely competitive in this country. Farmers and ranchers receive slim margins on the animals they care for. It is in the farmer's best interest to ensure the animals in his care are treated humanely, guaranteeing a healthy, high-quality animal, a greater return on his investment and a wholesome food product. Farmers continuously look for new methods to improve

their farming operations to make sure animals are well cared for.

Farm animals are generally housed in barns or other buildings with the exception of beef cattle. This is to protect the health and welfare of the animal. Housing protects livestock from predators, disease and bad weather or extreme climate. Housing makes breeding and birth less stressful, protects young animals and makes it easier

for farmers to care for both healthy and sick animals.

Modern animal housing is well ventilated, warm, well lit, clean and scientifically designed for the specific needs of the animal. Inside these facilities, livestock receive plenty of fresh water and nutritionally balanced feed.

As U.S. livestock production grows and changes, farmers' methods for ensuring welfare of their

cattle, hogs, sheep and other animals also progresses. Farmers and ranchers are dedicated to providing the highest quality and safest food in the world — their livelihood depends on it.

John Schlageck has been writing about farming and ranching in Kansas for 25 years. He is the managing editor of "Kansas Living," a quarterly magazine dedicated to agriculture and rural life in Kansas.

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