

Animal Care Backgrounder

September 10, 2009

- The science that is available to determine which housing systems are most desirable for laying hens, gestating sows and veal calves in the United States has not led to firm conclusions. No single system has scientifically been identified to be clearly superior to all others in regard to animal welfare because the welfare issues are different in different systems.
- There is no scientific consensus on which welfare criteria are most important. For instance, an animal behaviorist might focus on whether animals can express a wide range of normal behaviors, whereas a veterinarian might prioritize animal health, while a producer might emphasize animal production and reproduction as indicators of welfare. The truth is all of these factors interact to help define welfare, so no single indicator will explicitly define optimal animal welfare.
- Welfare tradeoffs exist for all conventional and alternative production systems. For example, in conventional sow gestation stalls, freedom of movement, and freedom to express most normal social behaviors are compromised, but individual animal monitoring and feeding are promoted, as are sow and caretaker safety, which can be jeopardized when aggression occurs in unrestrained animals. Likewise, in group housing, animals' abilities to experience additional normal social interactions and express a greater behavioral repertoire must be weighed against the risks associated with sows having greater access to each other, which include increased risk of injury and competition for resources such as space and feed.
- Alternatives to standard housing systems need to be further researched. The risks and benefits of alternative housing systems to animal and human welfare must be well understood and adequately tested across the U.S. with animals of the genetic lines we typically use for production purposes.
- The welfare of animals in alternative systems needs to be at least as good as it is in standard systems before mandating the change in systems.
- The costs of shifting to alternative production systems on a much larger scale are currently unclear and need to be validated by a broader data set than that obtained from analysis of niche markets. In addition, impacts of alternative production systems on consumers' access to high quality, safe food must be understood.
- Given there is no scientific consensus on which systems are 'best', those chosen for use reflect the knowledge, values and priorities of the people charged with

making such decisions. Those individuals have a duty to ensure the values and concerns of all stakeholders, including members of the public, are duly considered. Consumer demand will play a role in how animals are cared for in food animal production operations.

- Quality of animal care and level of well-being are not dictated by the size or type of food animal production system. Indications are that animals can do well or poorly in any system. Design of facilities is important, as is the safe and judicious use of any tools or devices used in production systems, but training of workers and proper management are also key influences on animal state of being. In addition, attitudes and beliefs of caretakers influence how they interact with animals. Thus, it is essential to develop and implement animal caretaker training programs, and foster high ethical standards in caretakers.
- Existing commodity Quality Assurance Programs are of high quality in relation to food safety and food quality issues. As the Quality Assurance Programs continue to evolve, additional emphasis is being placed on education of caretakers about how their daily interactions with animals impact animal care and well-being
- In many cases, best management practices are in place in food producing animal operations. Responsible members of the animal science and industry communities must, however, continue to seek to improve animal care.