

## Animal Welfare and the “Five Freedoms”

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Animal welfare issues have received more attention in the press over the last few years than they had the previous century. The livestock production system and its owners and managers have paid attention to animal welfare for centuries. It was just called animal husbandry for many decades and over the past three decades or so it became known as animal science.

In reality, Science and Husbandry were woven together by using the latest in technology and science to improve efficiencies in animal production while at the same time keeping the best interest of the animal at the forefront. The problem became that the focus and topic of conversation was always on the science and little to no focus on communicating the husbandry aspect of modern production principles.

In a society where a portion of the population has little to worry about, particularly in regard to an abundant, quality food supply and access to instant mass communication the concerns and voices of a small but vocal minority can seem like an uprising of society against agriculture and the science based production systems. It is encouraging when survey work indicates that in excess of 96% of the population is in favor of consuming animals for food if they are treated humanely during their growth or production phase when most press they are exposed to related to animal issues is negative.

It important that farmers and ranchers recognize appreciate this vote of confidence in our production systems and realize how important the last part of that vote of confidence is, “if they are treated humanely”. We are responsible to the animals and our customers to ensure that all livestock and poultry are treated humanely throughout their life.

A couple of years ago the first reference to the concept of Five Freedoms was from Dr. Tom Noffsinger as we were conducting low-stress livestock trainings for Texas Cattle Feeders Association members. To me the five freedoms referenced made perfect sense. As I looked into the five freedoms Dr. Noffsinger had referenced I discovered the history and origin of this list of freedoms.

Anytime you reference “freedoms” for animals it immediately draws the ire of industry because it brings up images of the fights fought relative to animal rights. Although the activists groups have done a great job of limiting the use of the term “animal rights” and use a more palatable term “animal welfare” in their messages put out to the general public, the animal production industries fully understand the underlying motivation for most of the leaders of these “animal welfare” groups. Most of them had a long history of animal rights advocacy prior to becoming leaders of the more middle of the rode animal welfare advocacy groups. There is complete justification for the skepticism of the producers of animals intended for human consumption have about the current leadership of those groups.

However, these Five Freedoms did not originate from these advocacy groups and a little history of the concept is justified. The concept of Five Freedoms originated with a Report in the UK of the Technical Committee charged to Enquire into the Welfare of Animals kept under Intensive Livestock Husbandry Systems, the Brambell Report was delivered in December 1965. This stated that farm animals should

have freedom “to stand up, lie down, turn around, groom themselves and stretch their limbs,” a list that is still sometimes referred to as Brambell’s Five Freedoms.

As a direct result of this Brambell Report, the UK established a Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (FAWAC). This group quickly became the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) which was established by the British Government in July 1979. Since that time under the direction of the Farm Animal Welfare Council, Brambell’s Five Freedoms were modified to account for more concern and attention to behavior and were eventually modified to represent the following Five Freedoms.

### Five Freedoms

1. **Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition** - by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigor.
2. **Freedom from discomfort** - by providing a suitable environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
3. **Freedom from pain, injury and disease** - by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
4. **Freedom to express normal behavior** - by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animals own kind.
5. **Freedom from fear and distress** - by ensuring conditions that avoid mental suffering.

As you look over the Five Freedoms keep in mind the following statement and acknowledgment by Dr. John Webster. According to Dr. John Webster: (The researcher who helped develop the Five Freedoms, and Professor of Animal Husbandry, (University of Bristol)

*"When put to work by comparing different housing systems, the five freedoms are an attempt to make the best of a complex situation. **Absolute attainment of all five freedoms is unrealistic.** By revealing that all commercial husbandry systems have their strengths and weaknesses, the five freedoms make it, on one hand, more difficult to sustain a sense of absolute outrage against any particular system such as cages for laying hens or stalls for sows and easier to plan constructive, step by step, routes towards its improvement."*

As a livestock producer myself I have a really hard time seeing where we can argue with the concept of these Freedoms. I also think it is important to note that production of livestock in non environmentally controlled settings make some of this much more difficult to ensure. With that said I think it is important that every producer of livestock or poultry try to accomplish these freedoms.

If anyone disagrees with the responsibility of the owner/manager to provide ready and ample access to water and feed to maintain health and vigor they should remove themselves from agriculture immediately. That is how we make a living. Provide nutrition and let the natural process of growth occur so we can capture sunlight in a saleable product.

Freedom from discomfort is probably the one that causes as much discussion as any of the freedoms in cattle production. Because we are not an intensive confined animal industry environmental control is not possible. However, I do think it is everyone’s best interest to provide cattle with ability to protect themselves from the environmental extremes as much as possible. Perhaps our most vulnerable areas

are in extreme heat without adequate shade and extreme cold without protection from wind. In my opinion we need to rethink shade in confined livestock operations. Although it is difficult to show an economic advantage to providing shade the recent problems with heat stress in feeding operations makes me think we need to reevaluate this area of husbandry.

Freedom from pain, injury and disease is another freedom that has some pushback from the industry and I completely understand that because of one word in the list and that is pain. There is no such thing as a pain free or even risk free existence for humans or livestock. It is the responsibility of the manager of livestock to manage the severity of pain for the animal. It is always in the best interest of productivity to manage pain, prevent injury and disease and treat as quickly as possible in the event of injury or disease.

The area of pain management in livestock production will be the next area of concern that cattle producers will have to address whether we want to or not. If we adhere to the *The Cattle Industry's Guidelines for Care and Handling of Cattle* (NCBA 2003) pain management will not be a major concern. Dehorning and castration are the two areas where the industry must come to grips with the "when and how" to best manage these practices. If done early in life there is much less pain associated with these procedures. After a certain age intact male may have to be handled by different procedures, pain mitigation, or left intact through finishing. Dehorning should only be done early in life unless pain management is utilized. The industry has already adopted that philosophy for the most part.

Freedom to express normal behavior is an area where the beef production sector is on as solid a ground as any livestock enterprise can be. In every phase of traditional beef cattle production cattle are managed in groups and have ample room to express normal behavior. Everyone in cattle production likes to see cattle be able to get up and run, buck and play at will. In fact we use the ability to express normal behavior as the main tool in monitoring the health of the individuals within a group. Being able to determine what animals within a group that are not expressing normal behavior is paramount to the success of health management programs in pasture or confinement situations. "Pulling sick cattle" from the pasture or pen is really just pulling ones that are not acting normal.

Freedom from fear and distress is probably the most misunderstood of these five freedoms. What does this really mean, "ensuring conditions that avoid mental suffering". Most people have never really even thought about a cow having the ability to have mental suffering, much less suffer from fear or distress. Mental suffering is what the industry commonly refers to as stress.

Stress and its associated consequences represent one of if not the greatest drain on the livestock industries. Stress can be managed very effectively. However, it requires physical management. You cannot manage stress by using a product or technology to any significant extent. Products and technology may oftentimes lead to more stress on an animal rather than less. A prime example are vaccines. Although a critical asset in disease prevention the product itself puts the animal in stress. If physical stress of processing, weaning, hauling, commingling is added to by improper timing of vaccinations we can either create animals more susceptible to infection immediately and/or have no response to the vaccines and have an animal thought to be protected be susceptible to viral or bacterial infection.

Stress is created through human action and therefore must be managed through human action. Other than environmental stress caused by extremes in weather patterns all other stresses are human related. If this interface between humans and livestock is the start of the largest economic drain on the industry

perhaps it is time more focus is placed back on “husbandry” than just the science and technology. The better the application of husbandry principles the greater the benefit from application of sound science and technology in animal agriculture.

There is an art to the proper care and management of livestock that has been taken for granted within the animal industries. This is one of the few industries where people are hired with little known skills or any real background in the industry and asked to manage multimillion dollar investments with no training and oftentimes little oversight. Managing the well being of animals affects the quality of life of the animal, the people involved and the profit of an operation.

Lack of employee knowledge, skills and training and inadequate oversight has resulted in several recent high profile problems in animal care and handling across most sectors of animal production. People who do not know or understand animal behavior and how to use that behavior to move or manage the animal can quickly become frustrated. Use of excessive force is often times the response to this frustration.

When it is broken down into its most simplistic form this excessive force is the result of poor training and development of the skills necessary to perform the job. Now whose fault is it that this training or development of skills has not occurred? Everyone in the industry is to blame. More specifically each individual owner or manager should be trained and be able to train employees to ensure that an adequate level of skill is developed to perform the requirements of the job.

This is an industry that prides itself on not being regulated relative to production or employment practices. If the industry does not become more proactive in these areas of employee training and oversight regulation will follow. The old saying “if you build it they will come” applies here too. If we build an environment of poor oversight in production and management governmental oversight will come.

The following is a statement gleaned from a presentation by Robert Spitze in 2009, titled **Globalized Agriculture Requires Regulation**. "Food and health are too important to be left to the unregulated private indulgences of men and nations. It is up to interested, informed citizens to help decide the desired combination of public and private policies."

Our industries cannot continue to deny that we are in the sights of activists, bureaucrats and regulators. The animal industries must do several things well in the next few years to prevent excessive and unwarranted regulation from becoming a burden. Animal production must be proactive in the aspect of making sure its own shop is clean and also in informing the citizens about the real story of food animal production. Nothing done in our industries are just done for the heck of it. Gestation crates and laying cages for example are designed so that timid sows and hens have a better chance of satisfying freedom number 1 and also to prevent problems in freedoms 2, 3, 4 and 5. Now I am not saying that there is not a need for continually monitoring and modifying current production practices to make them better. Anyone who thinks they are we know everything often time knows very little.

The general public has no concept of the aggressive and oftentimes cannibalistic tendencies of swine and poultry. They have not and will not ever witness the oftentimes slow and painful death of pigs or polts at the hand of pen/herd mates. The activist answer is always to “turn them back to their natural habitat and they will stop those aggressive behaviors.” Nothing could be further from the truth but

while they are turned out in the “free range” it is just harder to document these cannibalistic tendencies or the exposure to other predators. The survival rate of free range chickens is pretty low. Swine on the other hand is completely the opposite. They have few natural enemies in this country.

The same goes for the crippling and debilitating injuries inflicted on members of their own flock or herd by groups of intact males. There are reasons we do what we do but we have done a poor job communicating those reasons.

### **Managing for the Five Freedoms**

Stockmanship, plus the training and supervision necessary to achieve required standards, are key factors in the handling and care of livestock. A management system may be acceptable in principle but without competent, diligent stockmanship the welfare of animals cannot be adequately safeguarded. The need for better awareness of welfare needs, for better training and supervision is greater than the industry realizes at this time.

There have been training opportunities for improved stockmanship for years but there have been limited participation in these trainings by producers or their employees. More focus has been on designing facilities to help manage behavior of livestock. While this focus on facilities has helped it fails miserably when not coupled with proper stockmanship training and oversight.

There are more and more opportunities to attend stockmanship trainings across the industry and there are many excellent teachers emerging in this area. It will continue to be a needed as long as there are established producers who are in need of training or new people coming into the industry. There is always a need for continuing education in these practices, as well.

The amazing thing about stockmanship is that training is available at a low or no cost to producers and the economic benefits of improved stockmanship skills is tremendous. It is one of the few things we can do in production agriculture that can increase income without increasing cost. Often times it possible to save significant dollars in facility construction and repair by improving stockmanship and facility design.