

Animal Activists Take To The States

Groups unable to make much progress at the federal level



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Dozens of new provisions were added to both the House and Senate farm bills this year, but noticeably absent was a new “animal welfare” title that would have required strict new rules regarding the care and feeding of livestock. That’s not to say that so-called “animal rights” groups aren’t trying. Several bills have been introduced in Congress, including one that would curb the use of antibiotics and another bill requiring new standards for any meat products purchased by the federal government. And a newly released video of “downed animals” is generating new interest in USDA’s ability to enforce animal welfare standards at slaughterhouses.

But absent a lot of momentum on the federal stage, groups like the Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS) are increasingly turning to the states to push new bills or adopt ballot initiatives. And more often than not, they are succeeding. As HSUS points out on their web site:

“Between 1990 and 2006, animal advocates squared off against hunters and other animal industries in 38 statewide ballot campaigns, winning in 26 campaigns and marking a huge surge in the use of the process on animal issues. To provide a contrast, in the previous 50 years – between 1940 and 1990 – there were about a half dozen animal-related initiatives, and our movement prevailed in only one campaign – and that measure was later overturned by a subsequent ballot measure advanced by opponents of the reform.”

In the last couple of years, HSUS won big with livestock initiatives in Florida and Arizona. Now, California, New Hampshire and Colorado are facing some of the same. In California, for example, HSUS is pushing for a ballot measure that prohibits the confinement of hogs, veal calves and egg-laying hens in a manner that does not allow them to turn around freely, lie down, stand up, and fully extend their limbs. Petitioners have until Feb. 22 to get 650,000 signatures required to secure placement on this fall’s ballot.

The potential impact of state regulations is already influencing business decisions about

where and how animals are produced, causing some production to move to states with more favorable environments.

Emotional appeal

“Most of these initiatives have little to do with science or fact, but rely heavily on emotional appeal,” says Steve Kopperud, an animal industry consultant with Policy Directions in Washington, D.C. Speaking to a group of state agricultural chairmen in St. Louis, MO. recently, he outlined how some of the strategies are evolving at the state level, as activists try to move around the agriculture committees to others dealing with taxes, judiciary, and health.

The push to ban horse slaughter in the U.S. was akin to the discovering the camel’s nose was under the tent when it came to changing livestock industry practices, says Kopperud. For example, HSUS developed graphic videos showing horses going into a slaughter facility and generated a huge public outcry that led to two state bans on processing horses for meat – even though the products are only used in zoos and for export to other countries.

“Before the horse slaughter issue surfaced, we knew we had about 90-100,000 animals who met their end in a humane way and maintained some economic value for the owner,” Kopperud says. “We also knew that if we made it illegal, we’d have 90-100,000 horses with no place to go.” USDA recently reported that the number of horses exported to Mexico is up 312 percent, he added.

“Most consumers don’t want a personal relationship with their food. They want farmers to say: We’re doing the right thing, trust us.”

“The most fundamental thing you can do is demand evidence, not emotion,” he told the state ag chairs. “And tell agriculture groups to put up or shut up.”

Kopperud says he is seeing more and more ag leaders form coalitions to promote and protect livestock production at the state level, but more work is needed.

“If we spent one-tenth of what we spend on promoting our products to promote our producers, we’d be a lot better off,” he emphasized.

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