



Yvonne Thaxton (left), director of the Center for Food Animal Wellbeing at the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, joins doctoral student Michelle Thomas observing the cattle at the Savoy Research and Extension Complex near Fayetteville.

Animal Wellbeing; Expanding The Conversation

FAYETTEVILLE, ARK.

Taking on a timely topic is a good way to generate discussion, and Yvonne Thaxton has managed to do that in the short time that the Center for Food Animal Wellbeing has existed. Thaxton is director of the center, which the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture established at the Fayetteville campus in early 2011.

"It has to do with changes in communication," said Thaxton, whose own credentials in the field include service as a researcher on the Mississippi State University poultry science faculty and as vice president for science and quality assurance at Marshall Durbin Food Corp. in Birmingham, Ala. "It's difficult to make people involved in animal agriculture understand how we are perceived from outside the industry, but I think we're making headway."

The center – which was established with the support of a \$1 million gift from the Tyson Foods Foundation matched by the Walton Family Charitable Support Foundation – exists not only to bring some light to the subject but also to review animal agricultural research and consider its impact on the wellbeing of animals. "This includes confinement, transportation, every aspect of the agricultural animals' life," Thaxton said.

According to an analysis of the topic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, scientists should measure animals' wellbeing in different environmental conditions and their behavioral and biological reactions to stressful situations such as being constrained or transported.

Part of the problem that Thaxton perceives is many people get only quick soundbites of information about animal welfare.

The center sponsors an annual symposium that brings together people from academic and industry roles to compare notes on the realities and the public perceptions. Candace Croney, an associate professor of animal sciences at Purdue University, addressed the issue at the center's symposium last August.

"The definition of animal welfare is different between consumers and farmers. Farmers view welfare as meeting animals' basic needs for food, water and shelter, while consumers define animal welfare in terms of letting the animals live natural lives and giving them quick, painless and humane deaths," Croney said. "We have a perfect storm culminating for U.S. agriculture. If society believes the industry isn't self-regulating, they will take steps to do it for us.

We need to emphasize animal welfare as a key component of ethical, sustainable agriculture. We must take care of people, animals and the environment."

Thaxton, who is teaching a basic undergraduate course in animal welfare in the spring semester, noted that farm animal welfare is not among the public's top concerns, but the public does have opinions on the matter. Those opinions tend toward disapproval of tight confinement and a desire for better animal welfare. The American Veterinary Medical Association says procedures should continuously be evaluated regarding animal housing, management and care to insure the methods minimize fear, pain, stress and suffering.

"I think large-scale confinement rearing is a good thing, but that doesn't mean we cannot continue to improve," Thaxton said. Under her direction, the center is beginning research to provide farmers with methods for identifying animals in distress.

The disconnect between the public and animal agriculture makes it difficult to create a public consensus. Just as the general public has little connection to agriculture, the industry has not been as proactive as it should be in educating the public or responding to its concerns, said Kate Barger, director of animal welfare for Cobb-Vantress, Inc.

"Answering the question about what is best for the animal is perplexing when these two groups – the general public and the agriculture industry – do not see eye to eye and do not have an effective means of creating a meaningful dialogue to achieve greater understanding," said Barger, who participated in the center's symposium in August. She offered her own hope of what the center can achieve in this regard.

"Evaluation of the net welfare benefit for each concern and respective of each species is a supportive role that Dr. Thaxton and the Center for Food Animal Wellbeing can provide," Barger said. "When the answer is not clear, she will hopefully be able to give guidance to industry and to help drive research efforts to provide scientific and technological options for improvement and thus help achieve the desired net welfare benefit."

Thaxton said the next step for the center is to carry its message to consumers while serving as a resource center on the topic.

"We need to explain how we're taking care of these animals," she said. "U.S. agriculture is phenomenal in the care it gives its animals." Δ