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Specific agricultural cases for discussion

Note: The following situations, which each involve relatively specific management issues in farm animal welfare in the United States, are all based on information in Bernard Rollin's Farm Animal Welfare: Social, Bioethical, and Research Issues (Iowa State University Press, 1995).

The sow with a broken leg

On p. 11 Rollin quotes the following moral dilemma from the Canadian Veterinary Journal: "You (as a veterinarian) are called to a 500-sow farrow-to-finish swine operation to examine a problem with vaginal discharges in sows. There are three full-time employees and one manager overseeing approximately 5000 animals. As you examine several sows in the crated gestation unit, you notice one with a hind leg at an unusual angle and inquire about her status. You are told, 'She broke her leg yesterday and she's due to farrow next week. We'll let her farrow in here and then we'll shoot her and foster off the pigs'." Then Rollin writes: "I spoke to the veterinarian who had experienced this incident, a swine practitioner. He explained that such operations run on tiny profit margins and minimal labor. Thus, even when he offered to splint the leg at cost, he was told that the operation could not afford the manpower entailed by separating this sow and caring for her"

Question: Should immediate euthanization of such animals be required by law? Why or why not?

De-horning

Polling, or de-horning, is an issue on both range and feedlot beef operations and on dairy farms. Cattle with horns are more difficult to handle safely, they require more room in transportation and confinement systems, and the presence of horns can exacerbate problems associated with dominance hierarchies. Dehorning is done several ways: by treatment, at a very early age, with a caustic chemical, which causes some irritation; by burning the horn bud with a hot iron, also when the calf is quite young, which causes pain because the interior of the horn is innervated; and using a "dehorning spoon," which levers the horn out of the skull, a procedure which becomes increasingly bloody and painful as the calf ages. Cattle with the poll (hornfree) gene are born hornless, so it would be possible to breed cattle to have no horns. However, a dairy and reproduction specialist estimates that introducing the poll gene while preserving other superior traits in Holsteins (a common dairy breed) would raise the price of milk 4% or 5%.

Questions:

1. Is solving the animal welfare problems associated with de-horning worth a 4%-5% rise in the cost of milk?

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Questions about de-horning, continued:

2. What if a number of other animal welfare problems could each be solved at similar cost, with the aggregate rise in cost associated with virtually eliminating problems involved in management, housing, transportation, and slaughter all being solved for a 50% rise in the cost of meat and animal byproducts? Would an ideally humane animal agriculture be worth that? If so, should the changes be mandated and how should the transition be phased in?

Kosher slaughter

Kosher slaughter rules prohibit stunning the animals before slitting their throats. Studies show that in animals "stunned" with the captive bolt pistols used in almost all contemporary slaughter plants, loss of visual somatosensory evoked response is immediate and irreversible, and loss of spontaneous cortical activity occurs within 10 seconds. In kosher slaughtered animals, by contrast, loss of evoked responses takes between 20 and 126 seconds with a mean of 77 for somatosensory responses and a mean of 55 for visual responses. Loss of spontaneous cortical activity in kosher slaughtered animals takes between 19 and 113 seconds with a mean of 75 seconds after cutting.

Questions:

1. Some countries (e.g. New Zealand) have banned slaughter without stunning. Should the United States?

2. Would such a ban interfere with the free exercise of religion? If so, is this a sufficient reason not to ban it?

Farrowing crates for swine

Tight confinement of sows is recognized as the major welfare issue in swine management. Feral swine develop complex social relations and spend as much as half their time rooting. However, state of the art swine operations today confine sows continuously, in gestation crates small enough that the animals cannot turn around, and then, after parturition, in farrowing crates of approximately the same size. The latter are claimed to be justified in terms of reducing piglet mortality, since sows commonly crush small piglets, and the former allow large numbers of animals to be housed in climate-controlled conditions.

Questions:

1. Should continuous confinement of sows be prohibited by law?

2. Should farrowing crates be outlawed?

3. Should access to straw or other rooting material be required?