

UNDERSTANDING THE ANIMAL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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Animal rights is no longer a term only understood and used by those in animal use industries and the activist community. It is a term, or rather a concept, accepted and used more and more by the mainstream public – and generally an endearing one at that.

The rights of animals have become a part of our mainstream culture in America because of the misconception of what “rights” are. Most people think of “rights” as the care and treatment of animals – and to that, the vast majority of Americans would agree it is our responsibility as humans to care for our animals, whether they be cats, dogs, birds, cows, sheep, chickens or turkeys.

What differs for some is they believe animals should have equal legal rights as humans, therefore, be given the same status as children, the elderly or those with mental illness-- those unable to speak out legally for themselves. Generally those people would be considered extremists or zealots because their belief is beyond mainstream. To that end, these extremists are of the opinion that animals are not ours for use for any purpose, and their goal is to eliminate all animal use industries, including the foremost, animal agriculture.

The number of activist that are driven to the extremes of terrorist activities to create economic damage to animal use businesses or use intimidation to threaten individuals to quit their jobs or go out of business are in the minority but the number and severity of the incidents continue to grow. And most believe it’s just a matter of time before an individual or group of people are hurt or killed as a result of their terrorist actions.

The majority of activists, however, use legal means, such as lobbying, ballot initiatives and lawsuits, to accomplish their objectives, and are willing to work toward incremental “wins” to achieve their long term objectives of regulating animal agriculture and/or eliminating it altogether. These groups often present themselves as working for the protection of animals, in particular cats and dogs, all the while their sole objective is to create a vegan society. Because these groups are unsuspecting, have so much power through large memberships and are extremely well-funded, they are by far the ones modern animal agriculture and the associated industries need to be most concerned about long term.

While the group that comes to mind most often is PETA, the more prominent groups in this last category include the Humane Society of the United States, Farm Sanctuary, Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, Global Resource Action Center for the Environment (GRACE), Humane Farming Association, In Defense of Animals and others. Below is just a short list of the most commonly used actions in recent years by these same organizations. The four that are currently most influential are:

- * National legislative and regulatory initiatives;
- * State legislative, regulatory and ballot initiatives;
- * City and county legislative and regulatory initiatives, and
- * Media and consumer outreach campaigns.

Some of the activists' recent success stories include:

- 1995-2005: 40 states now make animal cruelty a felony; before 1995 there were only 10. The goal is to make certain farm animal production practices illegal by declaring they are inhumane, therefore, setting the stage for the use of these practices to become felonious crimes.¹
- 2001: Rhode Island adopts animal guardian legislation.²
- 2002: Florida constitution is amended, eliminating gestation stalls for pregnant sows.³
- 2004-2005: New Jersey established standards of care for farm animals in conjunction with farm and animal welfare organizations; Farm Sanctuary sues New Jersey claiming the standards are not humane.⁴
- 2005: HSUS petitions USDA to amend transportation regulations to include transportation of farm animals by truck under the 28-hour law (already was but unknown to HSUS).⁵
- 2006: GRACE holds workshops for citizens in Indiana and Ohio to train them to file lawsuits against CAFOs.⁶
- 2006: HSUS, FS, and other activist groups spend nearly \$2 million to pass Arizona Proposition 204 banning gestation crates and veal in AZ.⁷

The stakes are high for animal agriculture as these groups gain more credibility, more empowerment and momentum from their wins at the state level, more money from like-minded private foundations and individuals, and more power through partnerships and mergers of activist organizations. With their focus right now being the food and animal agriculture industries, it is more important now than ever that every person involved in the food chain remain vigilant in their own business and work together with producers and other food chain partners to proactively address any issues affecting credibility of agriculture's commitment to animal care and welfare. Every stakeholder should also meet with their legislators at all levels to ensure their understanding and support for what you do, build good relations in their immediate communities to inform and educate the general public about your commitment, and work to expose these groups for what they really are -- vegan led and driven groups working to eliminate the use of animals as well as individuals' freedom of choice. While producers, processors, and retailers have not yet felt the sting of decreasing sales, they are beginning to see their choices in production systems and farm locations eliminated through regulation, ballot initiatives and constitutional amendments – and this is only the beginning for these groups.

References

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6. *Alliance Link*, September 28, 2006.
7. Campaign for Arizona Farmers & Ranchers press release, "Out-of-State Animal Rights Militants Pouring Cash into Prop. 204," November 6, 2006.