

Neighbor to Neighbor

I have used this column before to define some adjustments we all need to make as the demographics of the County continue to change. We have the tendency to view the world from your own perspective to the exclusion of other viewpoints. It is easy to be “down on what we are not up on”. A presentation delivered last week to Utah Pork Producers pointed out a troubling trend that producers of food must deal with daily.

Ernie Barnes, of the National Pork Board, reminded us that the pork industry has critics. Most industries do. Critics say they want clean ground water, minimal odor, humane treatment of animals, no health risks, and no unnecessary use of antibiotics. Fortunately, pork producers want the same thing. We drink the same water, we breath the same air, we eat the same food and we have the same goals. Sometimes we may not agree on how best to achieve those goals, but fortunately, we all want the same things.

Barnes shared some data specific to pork production that is similar to trends we see with other industries. Fifty years ago there were 2 million hog farms in the U.S. Most of those farms were diversified, raising other species of livestock and farming a few acres of cropland. The pigs were often seen in open lots and pastures and death loss was great because of fluctuating environmental conditions. The animals were fat and non-efficient, but we ate them because that's the best we had. Most of the public had a fairly direct connection to agriculture.

Today, most people are somewhat removed from agriculture, many by several generations. Only 68,000 US farms raise pork. These highly specialized farms produce lean, efficient animals in environmentally controlled conditions where the temperature is always perfect for comfort and ventilation is ideal for maximum growth. The pigs are fed a balanced diet of quality feeds, allowing them to grow much faster than their ancestors. This clean, comfortable growing environment keeps them from coming in contact with their waste, rodents, or troublesome disease. Most pigs live in “hog heaven”.

Some people are critical of larger, specialized agricultural businesses, preferring former days where family farms were smaller and more diversified. Agricultural producers would also like to manage smaller operations, but with slim profit margins we are forced to follow the lead of other industries. Grocery stores, banks, hardware stores and telephone companies are also larger. The era of specialization and consolidation seems to be essential for economic survival. Most U.S. farms are still family farms, but the industry of agriculture must change continually if we are to remain good stewards and remain economically competitive.

Barnes reminded pork producers of the growing cultural confusion the public is having regarding the role and function of animals in our society. Some consider

animals to be companions, others see them as competitors, some see them as a food source, while others see them as equals with humans. People who have absolutely no experience caring for animals are telling seasoned agricultural producers how best to manage their businesses. Unfortunately, we see no apparent end to this silliness and all segments of animal agriculture are at risk.

In 2002, Florida voters approved a measure prohibiting the use of stalls for housing pregnant sows. Arizona voters did the same thing with an emotional campaign in 2006. The ban is nothing short of "hog wash", but the \$1 million plus campaign contributions by animal rights organizations was more than producers with years of experience could overcome. Volumes of scientific data show how sows are safer and more contented in their own individual stalls. Providing individual housing for each sow allows producers to provide individualized care. Unfortunately, voters respond to emotional campaigns and ignore proven logical data.

One may ask, what are the motives of the animal rights organizations that push for such unreasonable regulations? Are they truly concerned for the welfare of the animals or is it an effort to impose their own opinions and their own style of living onto the rest of us? I suggest that many are naïve, well fed, busy bodies with time on their hands. Many may be well-meaning, but their lack of experience with animal husbandry makes their edicts unreasonable and counter productive.

Livestock producers are committed to protecting the welfare of our animals. If we are to be successful in our chosen profession, and continue to be reliable producers of food, we must meet our ethical obligations, and provide adequate care for our animals. Most do that very well, without misinformed extremists telling us how to do it. It also makes good business sense. Animals that are well cared for provide the best financial return to their owners.