

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Walmart's animal welfare concept may sound like new-age political correctness but has roots back to the 1860s

In establishing its Animal Welfare Position on the humane treatment of farm animals, Walmart made reference to “the globally recognized ‘Five Freedoms’ of animal welfare” (<http://tinyurl.com/naj6992>). The Five Freedoms were developed in Great Britain in the late 1970s to guide the government in establishing policies concerning animal welfare as food animal production shifted from extensive systems to more intensive systems.

In October 2009, the Farm Animal Welfare Council issued a report, “Farm Animal Welfare in Great Britain: Past, Present, and Future,” (<http://tinyurl.com/njpmacf>) that reviewed the progress in animal welfare that had been made in Great Britain since 1965 and set “out a strategy that [would] lead to steady improvements in welfare over the next 20 years.” The report uses the “Five Freedoms” as its starting point. The “Five Freedoms” are:

- “**Freedom from hunger and thirst**, by ready access to water and a diet to maintain health and vigor;
- “**Freedom from Discomfort**, by providing an appropriate environment;
- “**Freedom from pain, injury, and disease**, by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment;
- “**Freedom to express normal behavior**, by providing sufficient space, proper facilities, and appropriate company of the animal’s own kind; and
- “**Freedom from fear and distress**, by ensuring conditions and treatment, which avoid mental suffering.”

The report notes that the freedoms have been criticized for focusing on correcting animal suffering and poor animal welfare. The report’s authors then assert that “good welfare should be an ambition, too,” saying, “our proposal is that an animal’s quality of life can be classified as: a life not worth living, a life worth living, and a good life.”

In moving beyond the “Five Freedoms,” the report says that the minimal standard of animal welfare is a life worth living with a good life as the ultimate goal. The idea of a life worth living is based on the idea that farm animals are sentient beings. And, the report makes the argument for sentience quoting from a 1965 report that asserts, “Animals show unmistakable signs

of suffering from pain, exhaustion, fright... and can experience emotions such as rage, fear, apprehension, frustration, and pleasure.”

Because animals are sentient beings, people at all stages of the production, processing, and consumption of meat have an ethical responsibility in establishing the appropriate standards of treatment of farm animals with a “life worth living” serving as the minimum standard.

The idea that a producer needs to establish production practices that provide an animal with a “live worth living” may sound like a bit of new age political correctness to some. But the concept has its roots in the establishment of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) nearly a century-and-a-half ago in 1866 and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Great Britain some 42 years earlier.

ASPCA “was founded by Henry Bergh in 1866 on the belief that animals are entitled to kind and respectful treatment at the hands of humans, and must be protected under the law” (<http://tinyurl.com/nd8endx>). Following its establishment, states began to enact anti-cruelty laws to protect animals. From the beginning, the society was concerned with animals whether they were living in the wild, in households, or on the farm. As early as 1867, it operated an ambulance service for injured horses.

Over time the standards for the humane treatment of animals have evolved and practices, whether at home or on the farm, that once were considered acceptable are running up against the changing expectations of consumers and the general public. Clearly the establishment of animal welfare standards by major grocery retailers and restaurants reflect this shift.

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Originally published in *MidAmerica Farmer Grower*, Vol. 36, No. 24, June 12, 2015
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