

A Shift in Climate



There's a chill in the air. Yeah, I know it's October and that's to be expected, but this has less to do with the season and more to do with a specific climate shift.

No, I'm not talking about global warming. I am talking about a shift in the animal activists' efforts.

At a time when America's political divide is nearly as wide as that majestic canyon in Arizona, the animal-activist groups are moving to the middle. At least their rhetoric and strategic approach is moving more to the middle.

A duo of late-summer conferences offered a glimpse of what appears to be a more "reasonable" movement. Of course, reasonable is in the eye of the beholder-- you won't really find the activists meeting you half way on issues. The strategy shift is purely geared toward consumers, corporations and lawmakers. The goal is to get more of those folks to think "maybe animal activists are reasonable and sincere after all; and maybe their message is accurate."

Find a comfortable persona, outline your message and stay on point. Gee, where has that worked before?

The animal-agriculture industry has long hoped that the public would eventually see animal activists as extremists. It seems that at least some activists intercepted that thought.

Conference speakers emphasized that activists must change their image from violent radicals to intelligent, thoughtful, professionals that have the animals' best interests at heart. Groups are even distancing themselves from extremists within their ranks. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals was noticeably quiet and less involved than in the past.

Another point being driven home was that activist groups must be less independent and more united. Supporting that idea is the Doris Day Animal League's merger with the Humane Society of the United States. The move will add another 180,000 names to HSUS' already swelling 9.5-million membership roster. It also will boost HSUS' public-policy activities, further streamline operations among national

groups and help coordinate animal welfare issues. "Our goal is to accumulate greater strength so we can be more effective," said Wayne Pacelle, HSUS president. "We want to show policy leaders and lawmakers we're a formidable entity."

Legislation and lobbying have become key pathways in moving the animal activists' agenda forward. HSUS and other groups gained strength in that arena last month as the U.S. House of Representatives voted to ban horse slaughter in the United States. Next month, Arizona voters will decide whether to ban gestation-sow and veal crates. There's also a federal lawsuit that challenges the exclusion of chickens and turkeys from humane-slaughter laws.

With a \$103-million budget, HSUS employs more than 400 people. That includes an in-house litigation team that is pursuing more than 40 active cases in state and federal courts. The group plans to devote more resources to legislative efforts in the future.

The group also will keep animal agriculture on its priority list. Pacelle said HSUS will focus on four campaigns, including "halting the abuse of farm animals on industrial factory farms."

"Agribusiness interests don't want Americans to examine how badly pigs, chickens and other animals are mistreated on industrial animal factories," he said. "They are resorting to distraction and deception to keep the focus off their practices. We hope the media will be discerning and not fall for their cheap stunts."

In other words, he's painting animal agriculture in a certain light and calmly, framing perceptions— accurate or not. That's another recently successful campaign tactic.

"Terrorism, damaging property and name calling is unacceptable, and it gives the opposition a tool to condemn animal-rights groups." That's part of the activists' new internal mantra. "Change takes time. We must be patient and diligent," Pacelle told conference attendees.

So, the climate surrounding animal-rights activists has shifted to a patient, professional, focused and more composed philosophy. That could warm up their acceptance among consumers, corporations and legislators, and open up challenges facing animal agriculture.

Now, do you feel a chill? ■