

# Science should take precedence over ethics

By STANLEY CURTIS\*

**R**ECENT announcements by major producers about starting to convert to group penning for pregnant sows have, as expected, triggered an audible buzz throughout U.S. animal agriculture.

The general and trade media are devoting more space and time to farm-animal welfare than ever before, and my guess is that more people both within and out of agriculture than ever before are paying attention to the issue.

Discussions of the farm animal welfare issue are complex, however, involving, as they do, both ethical and scientific factors. This creates special challenges for those trying to separate wheat from chaff.

In particular, I am troubled when ethical judgments are confused with scientific evidence in discussions of animal welfare. Unfortunately, ethical judgments have crept into the opinions of some scientists, so it is understandable how one can be tempted to conclude erroneously that an individual's ethical concerns constitute scientific evidence when they do not.

To use another metaphor, it is a bit like apples and oranges. Each is good, and even a combination salad of the two is tasty.

When it comes to farm animal welfare, who, then, should talk the combination salad? Well, in a free society, there will be different opinions as to who should talk the mix. My opinion is that scientists should talk the science, ethicists should talk the ethics and other interested people should talk the mix.

At the very least, when people recognized as scientists talk ethics, they should be affirmatively clear that they are doing so.

Although I think the term "animal welfare scientist" can be construed as an oxymoron, some scientists and some ethicists, respectively, will want to attempt to "straddle the divide." This will ultimately be necessary as we make progress in dealing holistically with the issue of animal welfare, but again, when scientists become straddlers, they should make it clear to their audiences that they are wandering away from science and entering another realm.

Applied animal scientists such as myself must be ever so cautious when it comes to being clear and transparent in speaking and writing for audiences of people in animal agriculture. These people have a lot of other things on their minds, too, and therefore, they need and deserve to be assisted in knowing at all times where the line — that divide, if you will — lies.

Animal agriculture needs to know about that divide because on one of its sides stands the evidence that has been generated by the scientific method, whereas on the other side stands the many individual notions of where to draw another important line — namely, the line as to what is morally acceptable.

I always have thought that ethical concerns should prompt us to investigate the matters of animal state of being and that the scientific method should guide us in that investigation.

I also think any consensus that a set of philosophers comes up with in terms of what they think we "ought" to do with respect to how we treat our animals is all well and good ... as long as the scientific evidence supports those notions. When it does not, then the animals deserve for us to bow to scientific evidence no matter how paradoxical it may seem to people

with their ethicist hats on.

Incidentally, it is interesting to observe, with respect to the move now afoot to move dry sows out of crates and put them in some sort of group housing system, how some of today's self-described hybrid scientist-ethicists are back-pedaling as they worry about the obvious practical problems (in terms of sow state of being) of switching the husbanding of dry sows in groups before that system has been more nearly perfected and, most importantly, before the nation's cadre of caretakers can be brought up to speed on everything from how to make thorough regular inspections of individual sows living in a group to how to protect themselves from personal injury when working in a pen with a group of loose, ever-hungry (limit-fed for their own good), 500 lb. sows milling about.

Those of us who raised hogs "the old way" know all too well the practical problems that attend those ways and means, and they are high among the reasons different ways and means have evolved. The fact is that sows of some genetic lines today are much more aggressive toward humans than most sows of yesteryear were.

Every change of routine in animal agriculture, large or small, has multiple practical ramifications. I am afraid many of the people who are offering advice or making demands as to how animal agriculture should do its business are awfully naïve and unaware of — and perhaps uncaring about — those ramifications.

\*Dr. Stanley Curtis is with the department of animal sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.