

Welfare tells 'great story'

By ROD SMITH

HER position is so unique that maybe six or seven others have comparable positions in the U.S., but at the same time, her work touches everything from animal performance to environmental sustainability to food safety.

"What we are doing ties into many topics" as there's an important need for animal scientists and producers to better understand how production systems affect animal behavior, health, productivity and profitability, said Dr. Anna K. Johnson, assistant professor of animal behavior and welfare at Iowa State University.

It's a position she accepted a little more than a year ago after being responsible for animal welfare at the National Pork Promotion & Research Board and developing its Swine Welfare Assurance Program (SWAP).

Johnson said her work involves 25% teaching, with undergraduate courses focused on domestic animal behavior and welfare and an internet-delivered, distance-learning program for graduate students, which is a cooperative venture with Texas Tech University and the University of Illinois.

She said most students are on agricultural science tracks but also come from other departments.

She said another 25% of her work involves extension to build productive relationships with agriculture and food organizations, including a project with the Pork Board to launch the Pork Information Gateway, an educational stream for pork producers, at the World Pork Expo this week.

She said the remaining 50% of her work is research, including a project studying the effect of weaning ages on the need to use antibiotics in the nursery and a project comparing feedlot performance to cattle finished

Key Points

- Animal welfare issue is becoming increasingly visible.
- Producers need to develop science-based, audited standards.

in hoop barns on straw, which has been getting some attention in Iowa, where both hogs and lambs are sometimes finished in hoop buildings.

The latter study will run two years, she said, and will look at cattle behavior, feed intake and efficiency, gain, morbidity and mortality, bedding costs, the extent to which manure would be contained, labor requirements and meat quality.

She also said she will be starting a project this month with the Pork Board and Premium Standard Farms to develop a chute design that will address fatigued pig syndrome, with loading and unloading being among the most stressful events in a pig's life, as well as on workers.

The findings of her research, which are being or will be carried out by graduate students, will be released to all producers, she said.

Carrying wrong card

About one-third of her students are heading to veterinary school, and most of the rest will work in animal production or at feed, pharmaceutical or other such companies, Johnson said. Animal welfare is becoming more visible, and companies are increasingly creating positions specifically for that, she said.

This visibility is because animal welfare is not just the right thing to do but because healthy, well-treated animals perform better and produce

higher-quality, safer meat, milk and eggs, she said. Furthermore, it's "a great story for us to tell consumers — a story that tells consumers how we care for our animals," she said.

The storytelling is becoming increasingly necessary as consumers become more and more distanced from agriculture, creating an information vacuum about food production "that will be filled with something — half truths, no truths. We have a positive story to tell," Johnson said.

Animal welfare is also becoming more visible because activist groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS) are raising livestock and poultry treatment questions, she said.

However, while this "is not a bad thing because it make us address these issues," she said it's also that these groups "are pushing to a different level that advocates vegetarianism and being vegan" as well as telling half-truths.

Johnson said this catches many of her students by surprise when they learn that PETA and HSUS have agendas contrary to their career plans. "A lot of my pre-vet and vet students don't know that the agenda is 'no animals.' A lot of them are carrying PETA cards."

The animal welfare issue is one that will stick, Johnson said, and it's critical that the animal industries adopt science-based, audited husbandry standards like the egg industry has and pork producers through SWAP.

The activists are currently focused on layers and swine, but the strategy is "to step over into other industries," she said. "That will happen," and producers need standards in place and documentation to show compliance.