High welfare standards will be demanded

By ROD SMITH

At first, there were “little things” — a business lunch with a meat sandwich was not permitted — hinting that the Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS) was changing direction, and then there were greater issues such as closing projects that encouraged more traditional agriculture, according to Jerry Rosman.

In making this change, HSUS abandoned a number of dedicated staff, farmers and others committed to alternative production and the health and well-being of farm animals, he said. HSUS “threw away several years of good will-building in the Midwest” to pursue a more activist, if not radical, vegetarian agenda, he said during an interview at his farm in Harlan, Iowa.

Rosman, a consulting animal nutritionist, coordinated a farmer’s market in Sioux City, Iowa, at which food was produced locally and naturally, and if it was of animal origin, animals were raised according to humane standards. The market was connected to the HSUS “Care4Iowa” program that promoted small-scale “sustainable” farming.

Rosman recounted that he was working with a number of swine producers in southwestern Iowa and northern Missouri who were hit so hard in the hog market collapse in 1998 that many quit their involvement in pork production.

At that time, he said he met Chris Bedford, then coordinator of the Farm Animals & Sustainable Agriculture division of HSUS, which included Care4Iowa, which led to a proposal that he help HSUS in its relationship with local farmers.

He said conflicts arose between what Bedford and he were doing in Care4Iowa and HSUS, which had started new attacks not only on large-scale livestock production but on livestock production practices that had been promoted to farmers as humane and sustainable.

Nutritionist recounts disappointing experience working with HSUS.

Rosman said welfare groups won’t help producers adopt standards.

NO HELP: Animal nutritionist Jerry Rosman tried to work with HSUS to show farmers the value of alternative production systems, including those with high animal welfare standards, but said HSUS abandoned the concept and will be of no help to producers in developing and adopting those standards.

HSUS policy

LAST year, the Humane Society of the U.S. (HSUS) adopted policy for “eating with a conscience” that advocates three “Rs,” including:

- “Reducing the consumption of meat and other animal-based foods”;
- “Refining the diet by eating products only from animals ... raised, transported and slaughtered in a system of humane, sustainable agriculture that does not abuse animals,” and
- “Replacing meat and other animal-based foods in the diet with plant-based foods,” HSUS said.

Group hijacked

He said he was told HSUS wanted to create models that would keep “less-intensive livestock units viable” by promoting free-range, loose-house, natural, organic and other alternative practices.

account policy requiring “meatless meals” — although one could buy a farmer a meal with meat if permission was obtained ahead of time.

Then came more significant moves, he said, as HSUS began hiring lawyers with an adversarial approach to livestock production and started to withdraw funding from Care4Iowa, eventually killing the program. The farmers market closed last year.

Finally, HSUS adopted policy promoting “eating with a conscience” (nearby story) that called for the end of consumption of food from animals, he said.

Alienation resurfaced between farmers and HSUS, he said.

Rosman said this all started happening just when he was making progress with farmers and groups representing them. Bedford and his short-term successor, Amy Freiburger, were “wonderful and articulate” and got along with everyone, he said, noting that he and Freiburger were organizing a conference in Iowa on alternative agriculture when funding was withdrawn.

HSUS was correctly focused on achieving good things in livestock husbandry, he said, but “it got hijacked, ... and now everyone is squared off in the corner again.”

Strange partners

HSUS and other groups like it are not pursuing animal welfare but vegetarianism and veganism, Rosman said, adding that supermarkets and university foodservice divisions that respond to campaigns promoting certain kinds of egg, meat and poultry production systems “don’t realize who they are partnering with” and the ultimate agenda to eliminate animal-derived food from menus, dairy cases and meat counters.

He also said this has left promoting animal welfare to producers, their trade associations and their restaurant and retail customers — many of whom are dedicated to high welfare standards — without support from an animal welfare organization.

Rosman, who co-chairs an effort to form the trade organization Iowa Organic Assn., said consumer demand for organic food is increasing rapidly because consumers perceive health and other benefits and are prepared to pay a higher price for the additional value. Producers are responding, he said.

The same will happen with animal welfare, he said, as consumers start to recognize the additional value of food products from animals raised in production systems with high husbandry standards. Producers will respond, he said.

“Like it is now for organic food,” he said, “when consumers say they want this product with animal welfare standards and will pay for it, producers will adopt the standards.”

However, it will be producers that earn the credit, not the animal welfare organizations, he said.