

Conversation with Adam Sheingate, August 2, 2013

Participants

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Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Professor Sheingate.

Summary

GiveWell spoke to Professor Sheingate as part of its investigation of efforts to improve animal welfare by addressing harms due to factory farming. The conversation covered challenges to achieving political gains for farm animal welfare, as well as strategies employed by advocates to affect political change. It also included an overview of the major differences between farm animal welfare in the United States and Europe.

The politics of improving farm animal welfare in the United States

Challenges

The environment for advocates for farm animal welfare in the U.S. is very difficult.

Opposition from powerful interests

The meat and agriculture industry is very powerful in US politics. It is well organized, geographically concentrated and has strong relationships with federal agencies like the USDA and FDA. Legislators from states with strong agricultural interests greatly depend on the support of the industry and join the committees that affect the industry. The industry also has the resources to use the courts as a way to block or undo unfavorable policies.

Lack of regulation and enforcement capacity

The regulatory authority of federal agencies like the FDA and USDA has been limited by past court decisions, and regulations that are in place can be difficult to enforce. For example, regulation prohibits non-ambulatory cattle from being killed and processed for consumption, but this is difficult to enforce, and undercover reporting has exposed a lack of compliance in the past. The FDA has not regulated the use of certain antibiotics in farm animals, instead opting to issue guidelines and allow the industry to police itself.

There are restrictions on what advocacy groups can do to expose failures of compliance by the industry. Some states have passed “ag gag” laws that prohibit

undercover filming and libel laws that limit what can be said or printed about meat production.

Lack of public pressure for change

Animal welfare is an area that receives a lot of attention and funding, but most of this is focused on pets and animals used for lab testing; farm animals receive less attention. This may be because people don't want to think about where their food comes from, because they find it disgusting or don't want to feel as if they should change their diet. Certain events have created short-lived increases in public interest, such as Mad Cow disease or the horsemeat scandal. However, this interest wanes, because people generally trust the federal government to address public health issues.

Pew Charitable Trusts put out a report about 5 years ago that was produced by a diverse group of food-related professionals. This was an important landmark because it brought people together, drew attention to issues of industrial agriculture, and spawned subsequent research, though no legislative change resulted from the report.

Strategies

Building public support

Advocacy groups can challenge the influence of the meat industry by:

1. Funding scientific research and its publication, particularly related to the public health impacts of factory farming.
2. Producing films, book, and other media. The film "Food, Inc." and books by Eric Schlosser, Mark Bittman, and Michael Pollan have been effective.

The public health implications of factory farming, like antibiotic resistance and food safety, may be more compelling to a wider range of people than concerns about animal welfare. Concerns about animal welfare tend to be seen as an upper-middle class issue, in part because many products that are made with greater concern for animal welfare are available at high-end food retailers like Whole Foods.

Organizing small producers

Small meat producers have an interest in opposing the use of factory farms and could serve as an influential constituency in agricultural states.

Advocating for minor provisions in large bills

In many cases, incremental but important policy change can result from a minor provision that is included in a large bill. Because the process of drafting legislation like the Farm Bill requires coalition building, an individual or small group of legislators can get minor provisions added to bills in exchange for their votes.

Pursuing enforcement through the courts

Advocates for farm animal welfare can sue federal agencies for failing to enforce their own rules. In the 1970s, for example, a case was brought against the FDA for not completing the review process for the use of certain antibiotics in farmed animals. The federal court judge ruled that FDA had to complete the review process. This may be a more tractable way to make progress than advocating for major legislation.

Influencing the regulations on industry

The Administrative Procedures Act governs the process through which regulations are made. The first step is that a federal agency issues a draft of the proposed rule and it is published in the federal register. Then there is a comment period, during which groups can submit opinions about the rule. In particularly contentious cases, the agency may hold public meetings around the country.

Advocacy groups take part in this process and sometimes influence changes to regulations. For example, after Congress voted to implement organic standards and labeling for agricultural products, the USDA had to write the rules that determined what qualified as organic. Various environmental groups led a successful campaign to oppose labeling of genetically engineered foods as organic.

Comparing farm animal welfare in the United States and Europe

Movement

The animal welfare movement is much stronger in Europe than it is in the US. This is demonstrated in the UK, for example, by the popularity of organizations like the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and the involvement of militant activists, who in the late 1990s detonated explosions in labs as a way of protesting animal testing.

In Europe, the meat industry lost a lot of credibility with the public because of the Mad Cow crisis. The US has not had a similar type of event.

Industry

Factory farming looks somewhat different in Europe than it does in the US. For example, the cattle industry is much smaller, because there isn't the space for enormous feedlots. However, Europe does have concentrated animal production in the chicken and pork industries.

Change in the public and private sectors

Europe has banned the use of certain antibiotics in animal production as a public health measure, and has enacted laws with the stated objective of improving animal welfare. In the US, similar changes have not occurred.

European consumers tend to be more interested in how their food is produced than U.S. consumers. For example, many major supermarket chains in Europe have voluntarily banned products that contain genetically engineered ingredients, because of customer demand.

Professor Sheingate believes that it is more likely that animal welfare considerations will cause changes in the private sector in the US than that a regulatory framework will develop. This is both because legislative avenues in the US are limited, and because there is significant consumer demand for animal welfare-approved products, so companies have a strong motivation to adapt. An example of this can be seen in Whole Foods product labeling, which allows customers to select for products based on animal welfare considerations.

Evaluating farm animal advocacy groups

Although some advocates suggest looking at meat industry publications to determine which groups are most concerning to meat producers, it is not clear that this is the best approach. Such groups might just be the loudest—as opposed to the most effective—or they might be the ones that are easiest for the meat industry to target and portray as extremist. An alternative approach might be to look at which groups testify at Congressional hearings, to identify which groups have access and influence in Congress. (Congress members can invite groups to testify, which is an opportunity for advocacy organizations to inform the policy process.)

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