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Animal researchers and farmers must take heed of changing attitudes toward animal welfare and the protection of the environment

HON JIM SUTTON

Minister of Agriculture, Parliament Buildings, Wellington

Everyone here is involved, one way or another, in the marketing of animal products. That's what the work you are doing leads to. You will have noticed over the last few years that this can now involve you in debates about the environment and ethics. When you are just wanting to get on with your job, it can be difficult, even frustrating to have to give these issues much attention, or even much sympathy. Yet the reality is that ecological and ethical issues do require some of your time. You do need to understand what is driving the debate. Then you have to strike a balance between the requirements of your clients - the people who pay for your improvements in animal production techniques - and their customers, the people who are sometimes questioning production methods.

Balance is the heart of the issue. In the past, the ethics of our agricultural practices was not a question we examined. Who needed to? We just accepted that they were appropriate. However, enough people have now had enough time to develop a case that at least some old habits of mind should be discarded. We can't afford to ignore the changing views of the world. The balance between the acceptable and the unacceptable is swinging. We have to ride a philosophical see-saw.

It is not good enough any more to think in black or white, 'yes' or 'no' terms. The achievement of certainty is what the scientific community has always encouraged, but it is also scientific to update old views when new facts become available. There are two reasons for this flexibility and willingness to make changes where appropriate.

The first is pragmatic. Our customers are always right - that is a fact of modern business life. Some of the various philosophies within the ranks of the so-called 'green' movement make a lot of sense. Some are half-baked. I have listened to the arguments for animal rights, and I disagree with many of them, as do, I believe, most New Zealanders. We do not 'vivisection'

in this country. If we ever did, the practice would now be repugnant. I believe that our Animals Protection Act includes all the necessary safeguards for what minimum animal testing we do. In comparison with animal rights, animal welfare is a principle I have no trouble in espousing. The old consensus on what were decent minimum standards are changing. And we have to take note. By protecting the welfare of the animals we produce, we can also protect our access to those markets where consumers have started taking notice of welfare concerns. The more we in New Zealand agriculture are seen as clean, green, and humane, the less we will have to worry about overseas consumer-driven barriers to trade.

In the realm of public opinion, perception becomes reality. A perception of environmental responsibility is built up over a period of time and once the accepted public wisdom is that a primary industry practice is wrong, no amount of scientific rebuttal has much effect. We have recent evidence of that. There was the furore in the United States over the use of the growth regulator Alar on apples. Alar's withdrawal was not caused by the discovery of new knowledge, but by adverse publicity and the public perception that it should go, so it went. Another illustration is the death of the fur trade. No fur trade, no market for possum skins. Some very explicit films of the clubbing of baby fur seals on the arctic ice and a long, concerted campaign against what we call the gin trap, have created the public perception in Europe that taking animals from the wild always somehow spoils nature.

The lesson seems to be that staying ahead of environmental concerns prevents difficulties. Action rather than reaction prevents problems.

I said there were two benefits in paying some attention to the views of the environmentalists. The second is more subtle than the first. It is the habit of mind that feels, as well as thinks, that our agricultural

environment is an intricate natural balancing act. It is the feeling that the agricultural environment is not something fixed and mechanical - the attitude that land and animals are not merely 'primary-industrial consumable inputs'. The opinions of non-scientists about agriculture's treatment of animals can no longer be disregarded. Nor can anyone continue to believe, as some once used to, that the land is just raw material for New Zealand's agricultural factory. 'Sustainable agriculture' is now more than just a catch phrase - it is a working philosophy.

We have learned in New Zealand and from examples overseas, that working against, rather than with, natural systems will produce short-term economic results. But the long-term environmental costs can be high, unforeseeable, and extremely unpleasant. We also need to learn that we cannot ignore the potential market consequences of changes in attitudes toward animal welfare.

Animal welfare is important to New Zealand and there needs to be a much wider realisation of the serious harm that could be done to the entire country if there was any major breakdown in our standards or practices. At the least our image and reputation could be damaged, not for now, but for future generations, but worse, we could lose important markets. The only philosophy that I feel can ensure, protect, and conserve New Zealand's agricultural heritage in perpetuity is an understanding of the right balance between the land's use and its stewardship. The same balance gives more weight to the question of animal welfare.

I suggest it would cost very little to add a consideration of the long-term implications to the agricultural methods you are using, researching, studying, or proposing. It is likely that the benefits would be out of all proportion to the cost. I appreciate that a call for 'balance' is hardly a stirring call to arms. I don't think it will make many headlines. Nevertheless, I believe it is vital. It is important for today, and even more so for tomorrow.