**INTRODUCTION**

Recently, public discussions on modern food animal production systems have become highly contentious and polarized. Popular media stories and responses often describe modern agriculture as irresponsible, unsustainable, unpalatable and unsafe (Croney et al., 2012). Among the concerns are issues pertaining to the well-being of animals, food safety, worker health and safety and potential negative impacts on the environment. Because conventional intensive agriculture is increasingly viewed in the US as ethically and scientifically detrimental in many regards, efforts to promote alternative forms of animal production have ensued, manifesting in a new ethical food movement (Croney et al., 2012). The prevailing idea appears to be that if conventional, intensive agriculture is “bad”, then any alternative must by default be “good” or at least “better” in regards to the afore-mentioned social and ethical concerns. Agriculture has responded with a slew of “educational” and “agvocacy” initiatives intended to win back consumer trust and support (Croney and Anthony, 2009). However, these are frequently received poorly by members of the general public, who either avoid such messages or view them with skepticism. Given that US animal agriculture continues to deliver what consumers claim to want—inexpensive, healthful, safe foods—such developments have become a source of frustration for animal agriculture. What factors have contributed to the current dynamic playing out across the US relative to public concerns about food animal care, management and welfare?

**FACTORS AFFECTING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF ANIMAL WELFARE AND RIGHTS**

Changing consumer perceptions about farm animal welfare may be tied to a number of factors, including the ease with which people can attain information about farming practices today. The US consumer is increasingly interested in learning about the story behind how food is produced, and many appear to be interested in making choices that support their ethical beliefs about how animals ought to be treated. Consumers surveyed about animal welfare have indicated on a 1995 Gallup poll that 91% disapprove of veal calf housing. A later survey in 2003 showed that 62% supported passing strict laws governing farm animal treatment, while another conducted in 2004 in OH reported that 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “farm animals should be protected from feeling physical pain” (Rauch and Sharp, 2005).

In addition, consumers’ definitions of animal welfare appear to differ from that of producers. Although many of the industry responses to animal welfare concerns have attempted to reassure consumers that animals are well cared for, the point seems to get lost that most consumers actually presume that farmers provide care for their animals by meeting the animals’ needs for food, water and shelter. However, the real concern articulated by many is that in contemporary “industrialized” farming, there is little evidence of care about the experience the animals are having or the quality of life they are living (Croney and Anthony, 2011). Such concerns are likely to be exacerbated by media exposés and undercover videos showing animals on farm being neglected, mistreated, or in some instances, abused by caretakers.

Other societal changes play a key role in perceptions of farm animal welfare. For example, urbanization of society has played a major role in shaping public knowledge as well as perceptions about contemporary animal management practices occurs on farms today. Since most people in the US have no connection to farming, their knowledge of how farm animals are reared, managed and treated is likely to be minimal. In addition, because many people’s primary relationships with animals tend to be based on interactions with companion animals, zoo animals and representations of animals in the media (Jamison and Lunch, 1992), these relationships are likely to color people’s beliefs about how farm animals should be treated. If nothing else, because most people who are invested to some degree in the human-animal bond believe that animals are sentient beings with a inherent interest in how they are treated, they are more likely than not to worry about the quality of life being experienced even by animals.
used for food. Further, the media’s widespread anthropomorphic portrayals of animals, described by Jamison and Lunch (1992) as the “Disney factor”, in combination with the growth of large scale, intensive farming operations, and extensive media coverage of farm animal welfare problems likely are combining to heighten existing concerns about farm animal welfare. Add to this mix the easy availability of new scientific information about farm animals that increasingly indicates their similarities to, rather than differences from companion animals and others, and the likelihood of creating cognitive dissonance in people relative to the disparate treatment food animals receive relative to other animals increases. Studies focused on the cognitive abilities of farm animals (Mendl et al., 1997; Kendrick et al., 2001), their capacity to respond to the quality of interactions they experience with humans (Hemsworth & Coleman, 1998), and their ability to feel pain (Millman, 2009) are particularly relevant here.

CONCLUSIONS
As concerns about the well-being and moral status of animals continue to increase, it is important for animal producers and others involved in animal agriculture to be aware that consumers are paying attention to what occurs on farm and that people are using animal welfare to indicate other important product attributes, e.g., safety and healthfulness of foods (Harper and Makatouni, 2002). It is therefore essential to critically analyze contemporary animal agricultural practices, and address existing animal welfare issues in order to reassure the public that food animals are cared about as well as cared for. As consumer interest in the ethics of food production grows, it is increasingly imperative to prioritize animal welfare as a key component of socially responsible sustainable agriculture. Those directly involved in food animal production have the opportunity to communicate their commitment to addressing both the scientific and ethical concerns associated with food animal production and to offer consumers animal products that meet their interests in safe, affordable, nutritious foods and also align with consumers’ values relative to animal care and welfare.

REFERENCES