

## **Free Trade and Animal Welfare**

**By Bernard E. Rollin, Ph.D**

**Colorado University**

My first experience with free trade – the advent of NAFTA – does not, to my mind, augur well for promoting animal welfare. With the advent of NAFTA, USDA could no longer keep Mexican cattle out of the U.S. The problem was that the Mexican herd was not free of TB and Brucellosis, and thus USDA felt the need to have these potentially diseased animals readily identifiable. To accomplish this, USDA mandated that Mexican cattle be branded on the jaw at the border, and that heifers be spayed on the Mexican side, which was accomplished without anesthesia or analgesia. Surgical sites were closed with “hog rings,” metal clips that created grave danger for workers at meat-packing plants. All of this was documented and made public by various activist groups, with Henry Spira running full page ads in the New York Times documenting these atrocities. Despite significant opposition from the general public, (including thousands of phone calls to the Secretary of Agriculture by irate members of the public) the practice continued.

Ironically, USDA had actually been found guilty of cruelty over a decade earlier in a New York State court during their buy-out of dairy cattle when, not trusting farmers not to recycle cattle back into their dairies, they jaw-branded these animals. Apparently the agency has a short memory. The practice was in fact stopped only after I had gotten an unequivocal condemnation of jaw branding from the Cattlemen of Colorado, California and Washington, who strenuously objected on moral grounds, and whom the policy was allegedly designed to protect!

To be sure, free trade need not inexorably be at loggerheads with animal welfare. One can imagine a strong trading block like with European Union holding out and refusing to trade with nations whose animal welfare practices do not meet minimal standards. Unfortunately, this is very unlikely to occur globally as most nations enter into free trade agreements precisely to overcome such trade barriers. Most nations, in fact, including the U.S., Canada and Third World countries, do not come close to holding agriculture to standards comparable to the EU. Any attempt to force non-EU nations to affect the expensive changes (or changes seen as expensive) needed to meet EU animal welfare standards is likely to isolate the EU, rather than change the others!

Free trade is ultimately about money, and financial considerations do not favour moral ones, neither worker welfare or animal welfare. Making current animal-producing systems compatible with European expectations is expensive, and most countries crave cheap food and profits, not morally correct food. Most of the world is acquiring American tastes for animal products, and most of the world wants such products as cheaply as possible. Large companies in the U.S. confronting growing social animal welfare concerns will threaten to relocate to Asia, which is far from concerned about animal welfare. Furthermore, these large corporate entities have already begun to export industrialized agriculture to the Third World, which has great amounts of cheap, uneducated labor ideal for staffing animal factories.

Thus far, there is little evidence that U.S. consumers know much about the welfare issues in animal agriculture. Were they to become educated, it is possible that they would demand humane food, thereby creating a demand for animal-friendly systems. It is thus possible that some countries might benefit such a niche, assuming they could raise animals humanely and extensively. But certainly free-trade militates in favor of systems already shown to be “efficient and productive”, not humane.