



# Discussion Topic

April, 2008

A monthly resource for the Community Action Groups of Michigan Farm Bureau

## QUESTIONS

1. How can your county Farm Bureau use consumer educational tools such as media adopt-a-farm programs, local legislative and media tours and retail partnerships to counter a misinformed public?
2. How can farmers increase their level of credibility with the public?
3. What can you do to counter lies from influential people without reverting to personal attacks?

## Animal care in a cruel, hungry world

After eating a particularly palatable meal featuring sumptuous meat, a restaurant patron was heard recently saying “this is why we will never become a vegan society. Chickens are delicious.”

As encouraging as that may be for meat producers, the fact is that animal agriculture in the United States is under attack by a small but very vocal group of vegetarians.

Why their individual food choices have taken on the fervor of religious proselytizing is anyone’s guess, but among their arguments is the contention that animals kept by farmers live under cruel conditions from birth until death.

Their contentions – misguided and under-informed as they are, are bolstered by cleverly edited video footage catching cruel slaughterhouse workers red-handed. And even if you believe the Humane Society of the United States displayed its ethical bankruptcy by refusing to stop the cruelty and by withholding the video until it suited its political agenda, the message is effective. When consumers have no frame of reference, the words of a celebrity – no matter how wrong – have undue influence.

“We have a major problem with agricultural illiteracy,” said Dennis Rudat, a member of the Michigan Ag Council ([www.miagcouncil.org](http://www.miagcouncil.org)) and director of the Information and Public Relations division of Michigan Farm Bureau. “Farmers are now about 7/10s of one percent of the population, but we still have credibility with the public. In fact, in recent focus group discussions, when farmers explain to non-farmers why we do what we do – using gestation stalls for sow and piglet protection, for example – the negative impressions of stalls is cut in half. Consumers are asking that farmers show them why we do what we do, not just tell them. That’s why we have to get people on farms. And if we can’t get them on farms, we can show them farms through virtual tours on the Internet, which is something the Ag Council is working on with Michigan Pork Producers right now.”

Other effective tools farmers can use, Rudat said, include Ag in the Classroom lesson plans, and the Farm Tour Tool Kit, produced by the Ag Council.

The bottom line is that farmers need to communicate in new ways to a public that is increasingly cynical, and help them understand that delicious chickens in abundance land on restaurant menus at least in part because farmers treat them well and protect them from disease, predators, and animal rights radicals every day of their lives.