

Dairy Business Association: Farmers must take steps to protect from activists

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GREEN BAY, Wis. — Hundreds of animal rights activist groups are influencing the way farmers do business around the globe. As these activists become even more organized and their tactics evolve, agriculture advocates are encouraging farmers to protect themselves from damaging consequences.

“Animal rights activists hope to bring an end to animal agriculture and take meat, poultry, dairy and eggs off our plates,” said Hannah Thompson-Weeman, vice president of strategic engagement at Animal Agriculture Alliance. “Most activists are not truly concerned with animal welfare. Their claims about seeking to improve the lives of farm animals are typically used to obfuscate their true intentions.”

Thompson-Weeman spoke today to participants at Dairy Strong, the Dairy Business Association’s annual conference. The event is virtual this year.

Animal Agriculture Alliance is a non-profit organization that helps bridge the communication gap between farm and fork. A key focus for the alliance is to expose groups that threaten the nation’s food security with damaging misinformation.

Despite the goals of activists, data consistently shows Americans love their meat. In 2019, they ate a record-setting 223.7 pounds of red meat and poultry per capita, Thompson-Weeman said. But activism is certainly having an impact on the way farmers do business, she said.

“For example, activist campaigns pushed more than 300 food brands to adopt policies requiring cage-free housing for laying hens,” she said. “This is forcing the egg industry to undergo a massive transition in operations, which comes at an

increased cost.”

As activists work tirelessly to convince customers that veganism is the best diet plan, farmers work vigorously to produce safe, nutritious products using humane farming practices, Thompson-Weeman said.

She shared actions farmers can take to protect their operations from undercover activists.

- Evaluate every information request carefully. Do not give information over the phone, only in writing. Ask for references and verify every step of the process.
- Ensure access to the farm is controlled using check-in and check-out procedures, visitor identification badges and visitor escorts.
- Maintain basic security such as locked office doors, file cabinets and animal product storage; use surveillance video; install firewalls on all computer systems; and maintain clear signage.
- Thoroughly screen all job applicants and check references. Double-check applicants who show university or college identification.
- Monitor new employees for unusual behavior. Be sure they leave the farm after their regular shift and stay away from restricted areas.
- Train all employees on proper animal care and ensure they are clear on all farm policies, including zero tolerance on animal mistreatment.
- Watch for warning signs of being targeted by activists. Signs might include increased requests for animal-specific information or farm tours, correspondence questioning farm practices or harassing farmers or employees, increased media attention, special interest groups campaigning locally, and unusual interest in gaining employment especially employment with access to animals.

Thompson-Weeman said securing farms is essential, but she also advises the animal agriculture community not to forget the importance of setting the record straight. Farmers can share positive, accurate information to be sure customers hear the truth.

“Community and influencer engagement needs to be part of everyone’s business plan with a focus on critical topics,” she said. “It’s up to every stakeholder in agriculture to demonstrate their own passion and commitment to continuous improvement in order to maintain consumers’ trust.”