

# Forget PC: Is Agriculture Morally

*Speaker challenges cattlemen to examine ethics of food production.*

Story by  
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Kevin Murphy didn't mince words in getting to his point at November's Feeding Quality Forums.

"I hate to be an alarmist, but I have to tell you: There is a time for urgency, and the time is right now," he said. "We've got to change the way we look at food issues, the way we respond to those issues and how we do it with the proper language, and we've got to do it right now."

Murphy admitted to the cattlemen attending the event in Grand Island, Neb., and Amarillo, Texas, that his presentation was dramatically different than the others. The one-day educational seminars had a lineup of speakers focused on increasing economic feasibility and ideas the feedlot managers, owners and customers could take back and employ at their feedlots and ranches.

But none of those issues will matter if agriculture is regulated out of business by the activist groups he said are leading

"an attack on agriculture that is literally unrelenting."

Murphy, the founder and owner of Food-Chain Communications LLC, spoke about the "food morality" movement and what it means to those in production agriculture.

"Every single day you can pick up a newspaper or magazine that talks about how horrible modern agriculture is and the sins of the industrial agriculture model," he said. "Now, we see activists

moving toward denouncing what goes on in food through the prism of morality, religion and ethics."

And it's not just typical activist groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS)

that Murphy said to be aware of. It's the people those kinds of organizations work to influence — university professors, reporters, religious organizations and civic groups.

"You can't believe these activists groups are so 'way out there' with unique and radical ideas that they will never gain

mainstream momentum," Murphy said. "If you think that, you haven't been paying attention. The people participating in the attack against agriculture are people you know."

He pointed out that HSUS and PETA have more than 200 full-time employees working to disseminate information and

influence opinions about agriculture. Opinions that include, but are not limited to, the topics of animal welfare and rights, the environment, food nutrition and safety and the ethics and morality of it all.

"Food is undeniably the most political issue on the planet," he said, "and I feel like agriculture is completely ill-equipped



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# Correct?

and unprepared for anybody to ask a question about their ethics.

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Undercover videos of animal abuse, *E. coli* contamination, “factory farming,” water contamination, antibiotic resistance, growth hormones and legislated animal housing are topics that surround modern agriculture, but Murphy says they are issues the industry rarely deals with constructively.

“How does agriculture traditionally respond to bad press? We ignore it. We scoff at it. We boycott it. We outlaw it. And my favorite — we ‘science-ize’ it. We put together a recommended handling guideline and auditing system. Then, when consumers are unsure about how we handle our animals, we tell them to read the 100-page audit guide. Boy, that’ll show them,” he quipped.

Instead, he said, agriculturalists must be prepared to defend their practices morally and ethically.

“Agriculture appeals to scientific reason. Anti-agriculture activists appeal to emotion. That leaves an appeal to morality, and we better tell our story before the activists take our moral high ground right out from under us,” he said. Murphy shared four pointers to appeal to consumers’ moral questions:

- **“Re-discover the 21st century moral farmer.** Throughout history, we have played on this image about how authentic and moral farming is, and now we’re allowing people to take that image away from us.” Everyone used to know and trust a farmer, Murphy pointed out. Society is now several generations removed from farming, but people still “yearn for a connection to the people who produce their food.” Be that connection.
- **“Beware the double standard.** This is a hot-button issue,” Murphy said, “but it must be addressed. If you do your best to raise a pet, even your best ranch dog, to human status, then don’t cry when somebody says a dairy cow, beef cow, chicken or pig deserves the same rights as a human.” He described a PETA billboard with the image of a kitten and a piglet with the text ‘How can we love one and eat the other?’ We must be able to morally and ethically differentiate the value of a human life and an animal’s with no exception, Murphy said.
- **“Shed our guilt.”** Agriculturalists are always on defense, feeling guilty and apologizing for what we do, Murphy said. “Frankly, farmers are in the business of feeding their fellow man, and they love what they do. Why in

the world do we apologize for that? Stop it.”

- **“Ditch the public relations campaign.** We dress up a picture of a farmer running through a field with a sunset behind him and think it’s going to make people feel warm and good about agriculture. That’s nothing but a false security.” Murphy pointed out that each segment of the agriculture industry —

livestock species, fresh produce, grain or others — has its own public relations campaign, but the industry lacks a unified, grassroots voice.

In the end, Murphy said, winning the battle of being politically and morally correct in the agriculture arena comes down to one argument. “You have to be able to answer one simple question: Is what you do right? And can you explain why? If

you can’t explain what you do and why you do it, morally, you will not win.”

On the other hand, he said, “If we tell our moral story, we will win. If we can’t tell that story or at least begin to engage conversations in that arena, other people will begin to dictate what happens in our food system, and we will be regulated to death.” More discussion available at [www.truthinfood.com](http://www.truthinfood.com).

