

Animal Agriculture in South Carolina: A Fact Book

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Depicting Trends in South Carolina Animal Agriculture

Christopher M. Sieverdes

On June 30, 1998, a conference entitled “Animal Agriculture in South Carolina: The Real Poop” was held at the Pee Dee REC in Florence. The approximately 80 people in attendance represented a good cross section of producers, educators, regulatory agencies, environmental groups, and agricultural interest organizations. This section summarizes discussions among conference participants. The general question posed to attendees in small group discussion sessions was as follows:

What is the trend in animal agriculture in S.C. for next 5 to 10 years?

- 1. Rapid Growth**
- 2. Moderate Growth**
- 3. Same as now**
- 4. Decline**

Attendees were also asked to give reasons why they responded in the way they did. They were asked to provide the rationale for their claim of future rates of growth or decline in the scope and intensity of animal agriculture in this state in the next decade. The question proved to be more of a stimulant for thought rather than a barometer of public opinion. There was no doubt among conference attendees that animal agriculture is undergoing massive change and that the general outlook for agriculture is fewer producers producing a high to moderate volume of products in an increasingly regulated, competitive, compacted environment where population density trends are up.

South Carolina animal agriculture will have to become more flexible, more sensitive to public perceptions, and more responsive to environmental regulations. South Carolina animal agriculture has to market its products as well as itself in challenging times. The national economy has been favorable during the past decade. We have the opportunity to shape our future in this positive economic setting.

When asked “**What will it take for animal agriculture producers to survive?**” respondents noted that financial issues, profit, cooperation among producers, educating the public, and educating producers were key factors which must continue to be addressed in coming years. Education about agriculture, increased funding for research and technology, the need to raise awareness regarding the role of animal agriculture in the state, the implementation of responsible farming and production practices, and enhanced communication with the public and legislators regarding the merits of animal agriculture were themes that ran through the discussions throughout the various groups.

Education of Youth, the Public, and Legislators

Some participants noted that agriculture should be promoted in a positive manner to youth in order to increase their understanding of different elements of food systems and the economic structure. Many participants stated that educational efforts should be concentrated on the young people of our state since they are more removed from agricultural production and farm life than was the case one to two generations ago. Information that was common knowledge about farm life is no longer common.

There was agreement that there needs to be increased understanding of the regulatory environment of animal industries among residents in farm, suburban, and urban communities. This increased understanding should also extend to the halls of legislative bodies at the state and national level. It was noted that producers must also gain increased understanding at the same time.

One group noted that there should be a renewed emphasis on “Ag in the Classroom.” Others noted that the education process must include all parties: producers, commodity groups, public officials at the local level, legislators, regulatory (environmental) agency personnel, youth, urban populations, the “public” at large. There must be

greater understanding of data and data collection regarding the impact of animal agriculture from an economic perspective, an environmental perspective, a regulatory perspective, and a social and cultural perspective.

Coping Constructively with Change

The recognition of the need to cope successfully with change was widespread. One means of bringing about change in the public arena is to form partnerships and understandings with other organizations, community groups, environmentalists, and agencies with regulatory responsibilities. Adoption of best practices and self-regulation are defined as far more favorable and “user-friendly” than practices imposed from outside the animal agriculture enterprise.

Change is ubiquitous. The need to cope with change without destructive and debilitating conflict is expected to become increasingly important for the foreseeable future. Changes place regulatory agencies in a pivotal position in terms of local government and business decision-making, formation of public policies, and infrastructure financing options. It is clear that the animal agricultural enterprises must become proactive in terms of environmental regulations and public interest on land conservation.

Increased Competition for Land and Land Uses: Land Use Planning

Another important issue which received much discussion time dealt with the increasing competition for land within the borders of the state. Land issues, land use issues, zoning of land, urban sprawl, encroachment of residential development into established farming areas, and preservation of farm land were addressed frequently from different perspectives and vantage points. Competition for land in high growth areas of the state means that farms and other agricultural enterprises must co-exist with metropolitan-based value systems and increasingly urban and suburban uses.

Some participants voiced concern about the “right to farm” issue and “takings.” They noted that legislative bodies must understand the perspective of the producer who “was there first” and is financially strapped in an attempt to accommodate the demands and requirements of urban dwellers and environmental special interest groups. The costs of compliance are high.

Embrace New Technologies for Environmental Protection

Conference participants recognized that the regulatory process is in transition and that the animal agricultural business sector must embrace new technologies to make business enterprises more efficient, more environmentally sound, and more acceptable to nearby residential and commercial property owners. This notion continues to be widely discussed by conference participants long after adjournment of the formal conference.

It is important for members of the agricultural production community to improve dialogue with the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control. The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources is also a key agency for animal agriculture. Agriculturalists pride themselves on a legacy of land and water conservation. Participants at the conference see that this legacy must continue within responsible and enforceable regulatory standards. While the state is blessed with ample quality water, this positive situation must be sustained if the state is to remain competitive for economic development at the national level.

We must control odors and flies! New technologies and discoveries and creative options must be encouraged by the land grant system and state agencies. The land grant university must engage in research partnerships with animal agriculture industries to find new answers to old questions tied to economic and environmental issues.

Survival by Increasing Profitability

This is a bottom line issue and must be given appropriate attention. Farmers must see profits within a span of years in order to finance improvements in their business operations. Adoption of new technologies is one

thing, but creating an opportunity where profit is probable is altogether something else to consider. An option for gaining more acceptance of new technologies to achieve environmental compliance is to review the role and relationship with commodity boards. It is noted that commodity boards have a significant role to play in the production side of animal agriculture in this state and others which produce similar commodities. In many ways this can also be a means of sending a positive public message through the animal industry regarding the success of South Carolina animal agriculture.

Engage in Positive Public Relations

Success stories must become publicized. The public relations approach also calls for education of the public, the economic development community, and policy makers. Part of the solution will involve alternative crops and the application of “good science” from the land grant university system.

Other alternatives and strategies include discussion about niche marketing, improving economies of scale, increasing farm prices, gaining new market access, and “cooperation through desperation.” Means must be found to make “cooperative” ventures, constructive vertical integration arrangements, and well-constructed contracts more accessible to producers.

Risk management is an art and a science. Farmers must become better managers, and they must be encouraged to follow the innovators. The success of “Early Adopters” must be viewed as a public relations opportunity for all of animal agriculture.

In short, the conference small group discussions were marked by cautious optimism. Many goals and solutions were discussed at length and participants seemed prepared to meet the challenge of the next decade.