

Michigan Editorial

Sometimes you have to pick your battles

By JENNIFER VINCENT



IT'S a sad day in agriculture when animal activists can leverage the Michigan Legislature to take aim at specific ag practices and put them into law based on threats that play on public perception and emotion rather than sound science.

Editor's Note

Specifically, I'm talking about House Bill 5127, which was a substitute bill much different from its original version. This animal welfare bill targets livestock confinement and housing standards, and if you raise conventional hogs, calves or

egg-laying hens, be prepared to do things differently.

As the bill moved in warp time through the House on Sept. 15, I gasped in disbelief. I was even more shell-shocked to learn that both the Michigan Pork Producers Association and the Michigan Allied Poultry Association supported the bill. It passed 87-20.

This bill, which by the time you read

this will likely be law, greatly changes the way many production ag facilities operate, and it will require major costs in materials, time and management.

Is this better animal care? Is this progress? Is this really a top priority?

I have my doubts, but let me back up and explain how this came about.

The Humane Society of the United States has been targeting states across the country, pushing ballot initiatives dictating how animals will be raised. If passed, these initiatives become constitutional amendments that are difficult to remove or change. In 2008 HSUS gathered enough signatures to put a proposal on the ballot in California. After both sides spent about \$30 million, HSUS claimed a victory with 63% of the votes — essentially the same percentage of support it had before the election.

This spring HSUS targeted Michigan.

In response, several broad-based agricultural interest groups formed a coalition and drafted tie-barred bills HB 5127 and HB 5128. In short, they were an attempt to preempt and possibly thwart an HSUS ballot campaign in 2010. The bills adopted industry-written standards, called for third-party audits and developed a 13-member review board.

HSUS saw it as a "fox-guarding-the-hen-house scenario" and called it industry's way of codifying inhumane standards.

It was made clear the original bills would never make it to the House floor.

Because HSUS is specifically targeting the confinement of pigs and chickens, those groups felt it was in their best interest to negotiate privately. What they came up with looks an awful lot like what passed in California.

Michigan's new legislation says livestock owners cannot cage a pregnant pig, a calf raised for veal or an egg-laying hen in a way that would prevent them from lying down, standing up or turning. It also prevents tethering these animals or preventing them from stretching their legs for a majority of the day.

So, how is that a compromise? Didn't HSUS get everything it wanted?

Not exactly. Here's the difference:

- Chicken space per laying hen is 1 square foot versus 1.5 that HSUS wanted. Noncompliance would be a civil action administered by the Michigan Department of Agriculture instead of a criminal complaint with the judicial system. It also allows 10 years for compliance, whereas the HSUS ballot proposal called for six. That's huge because a lot can happen in 10 years. Also, because it's in legislation, it would be much easier to amend than a constitutional amendment. It also gives producers more time to depreciate equipment and purchase new.

- Crates for pregnant sows and veal calf stalls will still be eliminated. From that perspective, it hardly seems like a compromise, but what's the alternative?

HSUS had threatened to start petitioning signatures Oct. 3. Polling showed voters were more supportive of the HSUS stance than they were in California.

Animal ag sat at the table, played the game and, ultimately, folded, but at least it left with a few chips. Hopefully, it's enough to keep Michigan's animal agriculture competitive and profitable.

YOU KNOW THE EQUIPMENT CAN HANDLE IT
BECAUSE YOU KNOW THE PARTS CAN.



At NAPA, we have an extensive inventory of parts that are built to stand up to the tough demands of your business. From belts to filters, fluids, and heavy-duty batteries, if it carries the NAPA name, you know it not only meets the manufacturers specs, it often exceeds them. It's no wonder people who count on their parts count on NAPA.

800-LET-NAPA | www.NAPAonline.com



We are proud
to support FFA



Get The Good Stuff.®