

California chicken proposition draws criticism from ISU dean

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By O.Kay Henderson

The dean of Iowa State University's College of Agriculture is critical of a new California proposition which requires larger cages for chickens that are laying eggs in a confinement setting. I.S.U.'s Wendy Wintersteen testified before the Ag Committees in the Iowa House and Senate on Wednesday.

"The difficulty with the Humane Society of the United States is that they really are not about helping people understand the science of the issue. They are about, really, building to the rhetoric involved and so you have a set of people in California that are very uninformed about the issue that voted to make a decision that will, in fact, have tremendous consequences across the United States," Wintersteen said.

"We will end up, if we're not careful, having more restrictive regulations than Europe does related to animals." Wintersteen suggests an "uninformed electorate" can be convinced of anything. "For us, the issue is that the Humane Society of the United States has effectively convinced the public that there are a set of problems, when in fact that argument is not based on science," Wintersteen said.

According to Wintersteen, Iowa farmers should be on guard because she believes a similar bill could "certainly" emerge in the Iowa legislature. "I think the Humane Society is very well funded...They really speak to people's heartstrings about the pets that we all have and the fact that so many of us are not growing up on farms anymore and we don't understand how in fact what are good management practices with livestock," Wintersteen says, "So yes, indeed. I think they have a foothold everywhere."

The Humane Society, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and other groups have the right to take whatever position they wish to take on animal agriculture according to Wintersteen, but she argues it's time for farmers and ag interests to do a better job offering the alternative view.

"In the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Iowa State I'm just about to the point of saying, 'We need to have a capstone course for all of our students that bring to the table all of these issues of the food system in the 21st century. What does it mean? How do we help them critically evaluate it?' We need to do a better job," Wintersteen said. "But again, if somebody prefers not to eat meat. If they want a specific production practice related to the food they eat, they should have that choice."

New standards for the poultry industry were enacted in California after a proposition passed last November which requires bigger cages for chickens that are laying eggs. According to Wintersteen, the supporters of the idea convinced voters chickens need room to spread their wings, but Wintersteen contends that's false as spreading their wings is an unnatural act for a chicken.