

An Ear to the Ground

By Walt Bones, South Dakota Secretary of Agriculture

Can we . . . ?

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I was born on a livestock farm and have cared for animals for as long as I can remember. We had cats, dogs, horses, and cows. They all needed to be fed, watered, and cared for and most times that meant I took care of those animals before I was fed, watered and cared for! So, from an early age, my father and grandfather instilled in my siblings and I that we had a moral and ethical responsibility to care for our animals.



One summer, my Dad came to me with a glass of water and wondered if I needed a drink. I was hot and thirsty, but looking at this murky, discolored water with some chunks floating in it was not what I was looking for and turned it down. My Dad told me he had just taken that water from the cattle's water tank and wondered, "If you won't drink it, why would you make the cattle drink it?" Lesson learned!

So I am intrigued by the current debate on issues like gun control and animal welfare because I see them as the same discussion. Unless we have engrained moral values, is it productive to attempt the legislation of behavior?

We have a whole myriad of laws and rules that try to deter humans from hurting or abusing other humans. Many of these laws are felony convictions and in the most severe cases, the death penalty is invoked. With all these penalties (deterrents) in place, our prisons still house people that do not value human life.

I am confident our ranchers and livestock producers share my core values on the animal stewardship and husbandry practices required to be in the livestock business these days. Proper nutrition, housing, veterinarian-approved animal health protocols and technology may be the tools they use today, but it comes right back down to the fact that they care about the well-being of their animals.

South Dakotans cannot and should not condone any form of abuse to the animals we have in our care and custody regardless if they are a farm animal, work animal, companion animal, or a pet. If simply putting additional or more severe laws on the books changes human behavior to other living things, controlling bad things in our world would be easy. So, I ask again, can society legislate morality, core values, or behavior?

We need to respect all life and there in is our challenge, I believe.