Poultry Welfare - Expectations and Reality Michael J Darre*  
University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT

Welfare of poultry, especially laying hens, has become a major issue for commercial poultry producers in the last 15-20 years. The passage of Proposition 2 in California in November 2008 set the stage for dictating through legislation how farmers can house and manage their animals. It also demonstrated how public opinion can be manipulated using emotional campaigns. This victory emboldened the activists and shortly thereafter the UEP and HSUS came to an “agreement” and proposed national legislation on how laying hens should be housed and managed, which sparked another whirlwind of controversy. It appears that the animal rights activists have had the upper hand in defining the meaning of welfare for commercial egg producers and we are now at the point where emotion trumps science and legal maneuvering dominates the natural evolution of farming practices. As a result of clever manipulation though ad campaigns by the animal rights groups the public is no longer asking “Why animal rights?” but is saying “Why not animal rights?” It is time for some self-reflection and to ask ourselves a few difficult questions. Why has the public been persuaded to accept the animal rights agenda over that of the American farmer? Is it possible to gain the public trust again? Are the new housing and management systems really improving the welfare of the hens? What does the public expect from the poultry industry and how does that mesh with reality?

Key Words: Welfare, Proposition 2, animal rights