

AgriTalk

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Mike Adams with Gene Gregory

NOTE: This is an Unofficial Transcript of an *AgriTalk* interview.



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Mr. Mike Adams: Welcome back to AgriTalk. You heard the last couple of days from the American Farm Bureau Federation and National Cattlemen's Beef Association, two of the groups opposing legislation that would create federal standards for egg laying hens. Today we hear from the other side of this debate. Joining us now is Gene Gregory, president of United Egg Producers. Gene, thanks for being with us again on AgriTalk.

Mr. Gene Gregory: Mike, glad to be with you. Thank you for the opportunity.

Mr. Adams: All right. First explain for us this legislation that is being crafted now. What would it entail? What would it call for?

Mr. Gregory: Well, the legislation that is being supported by both the egg farmers, United Egg Producers, and the Humane Society of the United States, calls for our industry to transition from the traditional, conventional cage systems into an enriched colony housing system which is a bigger type cage that also provides a nest box in it, perches, a scratch area, and in doing so it combines the benefits of both the conventional cage and cage-free by providing some enrichments for natural behavior in the systems. And so we're proposing this legislation in order to move forward in animal welfare as well as primarily to avoid the state laws that we're already facing and fearful of others to come.

Mr. Adams: I was going to ask you why do you feel federal standards are needed? Why do you think the industry would not do this on its own?

Mr. Gregory: Yeah, good question. It's been asked many times. We had...I think the egg industry and UEP has probably been more progressive than most anyone in establishing science-based animal welfare guidelines, and we have had science-based

animal welfare guidelines for ten years now for conventional cages and cage-free. During that time, we had looked at this European style of enriched colony house and said maybe that is the evolution for us, and maybe we can add that as a third option for producers wishing to go that way or customers wanting eggs from those kind of facilities.

The problem is that we have been under severe attack from the animal activists, and even though we think we have great science-based guidelines which 80% of the industry implements, we knew to make any further steps in making any further changes would continually have the same attacks and challenges from the animal activists, and so we knew that in a voluntary way doing this, it probably would not work, it would just draw even further challenges.

And so what we saw was that, as you may well know, there are 24 states that have the option of having ballot initiatives, and we were already seeing, since California's Proposition 2, we have seen other states that have been threatened with ballot initiatives, and producers then reaching deals to avoid those ballot initiatives. And as we have these ballot initiatives, then all of a sudden we have state laws and state barriers set up that limit our ability to transport and market eggs across state lines.

So the only way that we could see to avoid this unworkable patchwork of state laws was to find a way to preempt those state laws, and the only way we knew of to do that was with federal legislation. The industry has had federal legislation, as such, for our entire existence because there was no federal legislation, and so eggs could be flown across state lines to fill our market needs. But what's happened now, as the states are enacting laws, it's impairing that ability, and we need something that would protect us against those state barriers.

Mr. Adams: We're talking with Gene Gregory, president of United Egg Producers, about legislation to create federal standards for the poultry industry for egg laying hens. When we come back, we want to get his reaction to concerns we've heard raised by other ag groups that this could set a precedent that somehow could be applied maybe in the future towards other segments of the livestock industry, and concerns about having federal standards for those other species. We'll talk about that when we come back. Also coming up in the second half of the program Iowa Senator Charles Grassley, so stay with us. This is AgriTalk.

[*Break.*]

Mr. Adams: Welcome back to AgriTalk. Our guest is Gene Gregory, president, United Egg Producers, talking about proposed legislation to create federal standards for egg laying hens. Now this legislation obviously is targeted for the poultry industry. But Gene, we have heard concerns from other segments of agriculture, especially for the livestock industry, that this could create a precedent that could eventually be applied to other areas of the livestock industry, to animal agriculture. What's your response to that?

Mr. Gregory: Yeah, Mike, I've heard this from these groups. In fact, I listened to your interviews with beef and with American Farm Bureau Federation. You know, to some extent I think that there is this dislike and distrust for the Humane Society of the United States. And maybe we would have taken that same attitude a year or so ago. It's always been the attitude is, well, you don't want to talk to them because it's either their way or no way.

Well, we found that wasn't the case. In fact, one of the things that I think needs to be said is that the egg industry did not cave in to the Humane Society of the United States. In fact, we initiated this by going to them, and in doing so we set the agenda for how we wanted to conduct these discussions and negotiations. And what we found, if you have an agenda that you would like to propose, then you may find yourself coming out with something much better than what even you might have expected.

So we think these other groups have tainted their thoughts on this opposition by the fact of their dislike and distrust of the Humane Society of the United States. And we understand that, but what we've done is tried to be very careful about this. We have agreed, we and the Humane Society, if anything is tried to be added to this bill, then we will pull it. We have also done so by offering to amend the Egg Products Inspection Act, which has been an existing law for the egg industry for 40 years. It would be real difficult to add pork chops or milk or whatever you want into an egg bill.

As far as precedent setting, I think that that's unfounded as well. And I tell you this because every time the Humane Society has tried to pass legislation through the state or in the federal government in the normal legislative process, we were able to defeat them in all of those situations. It's only in ballot initiatives that we lost and we fear that we cannot win. And so I think that the message to these other groups is that we don't believe that the Human Society – and we believe the HSUS would agree with this – we don't believe they can pass this similar type of legislation for any other farm species unless those associations want to cooperate and do that as well.

You know, the egg regulation does not set a precedent in this fact, that we've always been regulated uniquely because, just to give you an example, the most recent example was the FDA egg safety rule that involves on farm inspection, very intrusive and costly. But it has never attempted to extend this role to beef or pork or any other animal products.

And what's disturbing to us is we would never attempt to insert ourselves into lobbying against something that beef or pork farmers or anyone else needed for the survival of their industry. And so it's bothersome to us that they're attempting to deny egg producers the right to shape our own future and have a sustainable and affordable industry.

Mr. Adams: All right, Gene. Thank you for being with us, and we look forward to talking more about this issue and others in the future. Thank you very much.

Mr. Gregory: Thank you, Mike.

Mr. Adams: Gene Gregory, president of United Egg Producers. So this week now you've heard from both sides of this debate over federal standards for the livestock industry. In particular here, we're talking about the poultry industry, but on a broader scale, our poll question next week will be are you in favor of the government setting federal standards for livestock production. That will be next week's poll question. Coming up next, Iowa Senator Charles Grassley. Stay with us. It's halftime on AgriTalk.

[End of recording.]