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- [About](#)

Dispatch Politics

DEMANDS BY HUMANE SOCIETY

Change policies, Ohio farms told

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CINCINNATI -- The Ohio farm lobby and the Humane Society of the United States are girding for a fight over the confinement of farm animals.

The Washington-based society says it is confident that voters will side with animals, while farmers say the group's real goal is to reduce consumption of animal products.

The Humane Society met with the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, the Ohio Cattlemen's Association, the Ohio Pork Producers Council and the Ohio Poultry Association in February to deliver this message: Ohio farmers must agree to change their animal-husbandry practices or have the practices changed for them via the ballot box.

"When we met with those industry leaders, we suggested we come to a meeting of the minds with a plan to phase out confinement systems in the state," Humane Society President Wayne Pacelle said last week. "My suggestion to agricultural leaders in Ohio was not to squander money on a campaign that was likely to fail."

The Humane Society has three main initiatives involving farm animals. It wants to ban gestation crates that allow little movement for sows giving birth, cages for laying hens that are smaller than 8 inches by 11 inches, and stalls that prevent veal calves from moving.

"We just think that's inhumane and wrong, and that animals raised for food deserve humane treatment," Pacelle said.

But the farm bureau says it is not going to roll over.

"They make what sound like simple demands regarding animals when in reality their true goal is to give animals status equal to humans," said Jack Fisher, executive vice president of the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation.

The federation sounded a fundraising alarm on its Web site recently. In its newsletter, the organization asks whether the Humane Society is making an honest attempt to improve animal care, "or is it part of a broader effort to disrupt livestock farms, artificially drive up the cost of animal

products and restrict consumer choice?"

Pacelle said public sentiment is on the side of the Humane Society, which has 11 million members and is the nation's largest animal-protection organization.

He noted that Maine's governor signed legislation this month banning crates and cages that cramp breeding pigs and veal calves, beginning in January 2011. It also pushed through changes in Oregon and Colorado and won ballot initiatives in Florida, Arizona and California, where the public sided with the Humane Society "overwhelmingly, in the 70 percent range," Pacelle said.

The society's polling in Ohio has shown it to be very similar to California, he said.

He said the society hopes "responsible members of the agriculture community will realize it's in their best interest" to compromise. "If we can't reach an accommodation, we'll do what's necessary to qualify a ballot initiative in fall 2010 election," he said.

The Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, which has more than 230,000 members and lobbies for the state's farmers and farming interests, characterizes the Humane Society as driven by a vegan philosophy that "often uses images of sad-eyed puppies to solicit donations from well-meaning individuals."

"We respect their passion for these particular issues," said Keith Stimpert, the federation's senior vice president of public policy. "Unfortunately, making these decisions at the ballot box is a very poor approach."

He said the farm bureau is starting a Center for Food and Animal Issues that will focus on animals' role in society. The center will raise money and be the federation's voice on farm animal-welfare issues.