

# Animal Welfare in the Marketplace: Time for a new paradigm

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A veterinarian by trade, with advanced degrees in Epidemiology and Animal Welfare, Ethics, Policy & Law, Dr. Jen's life's work is improving the lives of animals in production systems. Leaving traditional practice in 2010 to create change at the corporate level, she has been developing industry leading programs designed to elevate the welfare of dairy cattle and manage risk for the business.



**Kinder Ground is a non-profit 'Fund for Good' that seeks to shift animal welfare attitudes from compliance to compassion.**

After nearly 15 years managing animal welfare for dairy processors, I stepped away to run a *Fund for Good*, here's why.

Today, every major farmed animal species in the US has an industry program establishing a minimum standard for animal welfare. Dairy, slaughter, and poultry each have mandatory animal welfare audits, pork and beef are flirting with some version of mandatory audits. The US dairy industry has developed an admirable and robust process for managing compliance of farms failing to meet basic standards of care and handling and requiring at least one mode of pain mitigation for painful procedures. It is worth noting, "best practice" for pain management is to provide both a local anesthetic, and an anti-inflammatory.

No doubt those steeped in this work will insist there is much more progress worthy of note. I agree. But progress isn't the point. Let's be honest. When it comes to animal welfare the bar is set pretty low. If enforced at all, corrective actions are limited to paperwork, training, and the very basics of good stockmanship including timely and humane euthanasia. To put it bluntly, our written, occasionally enforced, standard is "don't be a jerk," certainly a reasonable expectation.

## False Profits/Prophets

What about farms that, whether on principle or to satisfy customer requirements, have adopted different standards? Cage-free, pasture-raised, grass-fed, organic, or pick your animal welfare certification. While I think it is fair to say that cattle with pasture access fare better in some ways than those strictly confined to tie-stalls, many have no access to shade. Yes, standards are important, as are audits. But let's be clear, there is more to welfare than not being confined, dragged, or in pain. It is also critical to understand that **audits don't improve welfare, people do**. If the entire point is to manage risk, sell more product, and get activists off our collective case, then we are on a reasonable path, at least for the first two. *The limit to this approach is its tendency to build a habit of compliance.* Despite this, based on the available data, we have not seen broad meaningful improvement in key welfare indicators. Lameness on dairies prevails at 25%, we continue to see too many cattle not fit for transport arriving at slaughter or the sale barn, too many male calves with failure of passive transfer and timely euthanasia remains a challenge.

## A habit sustains when motivation wanes.

Have we considered that the current goal post is a far cry from what I think consumers expect from us? **To be kind.** To acknowledge the emotional lives of the animals in our care. To respect that they have specific drives and preferences in how and where they lay, nest, play and root. To put that understanding to good use in managing and caring for farm animals. To understand that a life without suffering does not equate to good welfare and a life worth living. A culture of compliance will make sure the boxes are checked but it's not enough when folks are tired, frustrated or managing the unexpected. A habit of **compassion** helps us meet the moment, when tired or not prepared. Compassion will foster the moral imagination needed to get ahead of our critics. Compassion is what will move us beyond the *five freedoms* to figure out how to optimize animal welfare with profit, giving the animals in our systems a life worth living.

calves. Working with his dairy processor welfare specialist, the farmer developed a calf housing strategy that would help get calves off to a better start and was flexible enough to let them try and implement paired housing and feeding hay.

Dairypalooza! was our next project, a week-long immersive learning experience designed exclusively for college students. The mission is simple but profound: to inspire the next generation of dairy professionals by opening doors to career possibilities that stretch far beyond the dairy farm gate while making animal welfare a **habit of thought** at every step in the process. Dairypalooza! is sowing seeds of compassion in future dairy professionals as we discuss the opportunities and challenges of animal welfare in dairy systems of all shapes and sizes. Despite a wealth of evidence demonstrating the benefits of paired or social housing, students noted every farm visited was housing calves individually, feeding less than recommended



**Kinder Ground provides financial support for a variety of on-farm needs, including calf housing, calf coats, hoof trim training, a float tank and more.**

volumes of milk and none offered forage. Students had the opportunity for open discussion with farms to better understand the many barriers to adoption of new practices.

**We have to talk about lameness.** Many farms chronically underestimate lameness and may not identify cows early enough to prevent long term damage to the hoof. Based on previous animal welfare audits this farm had an estimated lameness prevalence of around 20%. A firm believer that cow longevity matters and is critical to the sustainability of the business, this farm also understands that good welfare and healthy feet are essential to cow longevity. Machine learning and other forms of technology hold great promise in helping us improve welfare. This project is ongoing, but we have learned a lot already. The cloud-based locomotion scoring system can accurately identify first lactation cows with lameness due to sole ulcers and white-line disease sooner than typically done by personal observation.

And this is just the beginning. Kinder Hoof Care consultations, a hoof trimming school, travel grants for humane handling at slaughter training, and a farm that will use a float tank paid for by Kinder Ground to support the recovery of down cows in his farming community are each examples of our next round of projects. Our vision is a world that shares responsibility for cultivating kindness, compassion, and respect for the animals and people that sustain us. We believe that, together, we can make a difference. We're making compassion contagious, sharing our learnings and resources with the farming community.


If you are interested in learning more, check us out at [KinderGround.org](http://KinderGround.org).

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**Compassion as a contagion.** Advancing the welfare conversation beyond the basics requires a new strategy. If progress is to be maintained, if better ways were going to be found to manage animals in production, it was going to have to come from the ground up, not top down. Could we make compassion contagious? That was the question that sprouted Kinder Ground, an experiment in compassion. Kinder Ground is a *Fund for Good* - dedicated solely to elevating the welfare of animals in food production, with no hidden agenda. A Kinder Ground core belief is that everyone needs to have skin in the game. Seed funding given by our co-founders kickstarted the work funding the early projects. Kinder Ground is interested in all major livestock species, including poultry. So far, projects have been dairy-focused to our founder's reach, as well as ease of implementation. Early projects have ranged from testing technology, to improving housing to teaching the next generation about dairy cattle welfare.

Our first project was to support a farm's transition to safer and comfortable housing for calves. Providing a dairy farm with calf hutches, large calf bottles and hay racks encouraging adoption of social housing and improved feeding practices. The farm's original housing set-up was a patchwork of gates, fences, and trailers, as the farm had grown from milking 25 cows to 50. This made everything from feeding, cleaning, and caring for calves harder. One of the consequences was high morbidity (50%) and mortality (>20%) in the young