



It's a never-ending fight in production agriculture: animal rights activists versus livestock producers. However, lately, the line distinguishing the two camps is a bit fuzzy.

Washington, D.C., in its current state of very narrow margins, is especially prone to unconventional tactics from activist groups, shares Ethan Lane, National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Vice President of Government Affairs. He provides insights into the evolving dynamics of animal rights advocacy and the new challenges facing the livestock industry.

ADVANCEMENT OF ASTROTURFS

Longstanding extremist organizations like the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) are employing new strategies to insert their agendas into

the legislative discourse. Their key to swaying lawmakers and public opinion, Lane observes, "is to create wedge issues and look for opportunities to operate in the shadows."

The looming 2023 Farm Bill is the perfect storm to enact such schemes. Exploiting the close margins in Congress, these groups are in position to "slip between the cracks in these big packages that tend to be the only way we can get anything done in Washington," Lane says.

These major players have deep pockets, armed with \$200 to \$300 million each in the case of ASPCA and HSUS. Copious low-dollar donations, institutional funding and family foundations finance their activities. But very little of that money is used as donors expect, like helping local and state animal shelters as marketing claims imply. Instead,

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Ethan Lane



Ethan Lane is the Vice President of Government Affairs at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. Ethan is a fifth generation Arizonan with more than 20 years of experience in natural resources, land use issues and advocacy on behalf of the cattle industry.

Prior to NCBA, Ethan was the Executive Director for the Public Lands Council and Senior Executive Director of the NCBA Federal Lands portfolio. Before joining PLC and NCBA, Ethan operated a consulting firm where he worked on multiple high profile political campaigns and advised a variety of private companies and industries on regulatory and legislative issues impacting their businesses.

Prior to moving to Washington, D.C., Ethan spent 10 years helping to grow and manage a large real estate and ranch portfolio in Arizona. His diverse background gives him a unique perspective on the challenges producers face on a daily basis.

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a small fraction of these contributions, often as low as 1-2%, goes to shelters, with the rest channeled into salaries, anti-animal agriculture advocacy and media campaigns — according to investigations from the Center of Environment and Welfare, says Lane. Furthermore, he notes some of these groups reportedly offshore substantial sums in Caribbean bank accounts, raising questions about their financial practices.

An alarming trend is the proliferation of what Lane dubs “AstroTurf” groups, which masquerade as grassroots organizations. Funded by lucrative groups like ASPCA and HSUS, these front groups act as aggrieved producers to advance fanatical agendas. Lane says, “They’re basically trying to tell Washington, ‘Trust us — we know what we’re talking about, and these farm and ranch groups do not.’”

ASTROTURFS IN ACTION

Many concerted efforts from AstroTurfs target Conservative politics to normalize radical positions. Lane highlights Farm Action and the Organization for Competitive Markets (OCM) as key offenders in this arena. He paints the picture of how support spirals from innocuous issues like dog meat consumption and horse transport to eliminating checkoff programs and curbing feedlot operations.

“These Congressional members go down the rabbit hole on these kind of peripheral animal rights issues,” Lane says, “and then activist groups are knocking at their door telling them that feedlots are really detrimental, and we need to start banning anything over a thousand head.”

Leveraging momentum from the conservative Supreme Court’s recent ruling in support of California’s Proposition 12 (Prop 12), front groups are also using justices’ support of states’ rights as “a weapon rather than a hurdle,” Lane says. Passed in 2018, Prop 12 mandated increased confinement space for laying hens, hogs and veal calves raised in California, and banned the sale of any products derived from farms not meeting the law’s minimum requirements. Sale restrictions also applied to products sold within the state sourced from out-of-state farms, raising concerns about nationwide market impacts.

In response to this legislation, the Ending Agricultural Trade Suppression (EATS) Act has been proposed as part of the 2023 Farm Bill to address interstate commerce issues and complexities arising from these state-level initiatives. Lane says it seeks to ensure sovereignty over intrastate commerce, but also places some limits to prohibit states from impacting how other states conduct business.

OCM is also pushing hard against the EATS Act. Its iconography-focused campaign seeks to undermine the proposed legislations with claims that the bill’s supporters are submitting to the willpower of the Chinese Communist Party. Meanwhile, activists are rallying around the Opportunities for Fairness in Farming (OFF) Act to restrict checkoff programs. Lane notes the bill contains redundant provisions, many

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of which are already in place to monitor checkoffs. The bill's primary objective is to eliminate checkoffs' ability to contract with organizations employing federal lobbyists, which could hinder their promotional efforts.

Fortunately, many lawmakers see through the misleading plotlines provided from anti-animal agriculture nonprofits. After a recent Washington D.C. Fly-In, Lane and the 18-member staff at NCBA's Washington office received several comments from offices who met with groups like Farm Action and OCM, that shared, "10 minutes into that meeting, it was really clear: Those are not farmers and ranchers. Those are animal rights activists."

Ultimately, NCBA and other pro-production agricultural organizations are focused on collective efforts to pass a Farm Bill that best serves the entire sector. Rather than including a livestock-specific title, Lane

explains the cattle industry is simply asking for expanded funding for the Foot-and-Mouth Disease Vaccine Bank in the upcoming bill. Measures beyond that could introduce complexities and "cracks" that will complicate the passage of the overall bill.

Lane encourages producers to be vigilant about the organizations they encounter and recommends resources like the Center for Environment and Welfare to understand the affiliations and funding sources of various organizations. He believes every farmer and rancher can make a difference by getting involved with NCBA's 46 state affiliates.

This involvement creates a "multiplier effect" that amplifies pro-animal agricultural voices in policy discussions and provides access to information from national discussions. The collective effort of these affiliates contributes to the protection of the interests of American agriculturalists. ♦

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