

Effort to improve farm-animal treatment expands globally

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) To envision where the farm-animal welfare movement might go next in the United States, experts look to Europe.

Many reforms hitting the U.S. today were rolled out there roughly 10 years ago. Wire battery cages for chickens, for example, disappeared from the European Union in 2012, after a 13-year phaseout.

“In Europe today, farrowing crates are the discussion,” said Thomas Parsons, a University of Pennsylvania animal science expert, referring to crates that immobilize sows as they are nursing newborn piglets. Just before giving birth, sows are moved from gestation crates into farrowing crates to protect piglets from getting pinned or crushed when their hulking mothers flop down to nurse.

Farrowing crates confine sows only for the brief few weeks that they are nursing, but the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Treatment deemed them to be as inhumane as gestation crates.

EU consumers have also demanded an end to the unanesthetized castration of male piglets, and EU swine-industry representatives have now agreed to end all surgical castrations by 2018.

Europe may be moving more aggressively on these issues in part because of treaties that define animals, including “food animals,” as more than just commodities. Europe’s 2009 Treaty of Lisbon requires that when signatory countries write new laws, they acknowledge animals as “sentient beings.”

But while both Europeans and Americans are pushing back against the most extreme forms of animal confinement, US food producers are preparing to expand as the demand for meat surges in emerging economies. China already farms more than half the world’s food animals, and the Chinese meat giant Shuanghui International bought Smithfield Foods this year to help feed the country’s rapidly

growing middle class.

Yet that same Chinese middle class is also pressing for more humane treatment of animals. Grass-roots animal-protection groups are cropping up across China, and this spring the country's Ministry of Education announced China's first university animal welfare curriculum. In June, the country stopped requiring animal testing for Chinese cosmetic products.

Meanwhile, Humane Society International is poised for an aggressive expansion into several Latin American and Asian countries in response to a globalizing food economy. One question is what US meat, dairy, and egg producers—facing new animal welfare reforms at home—will do with their domestic operations as they expand to sell far more meat overseas.