

A rare, and deserved, pat on the back for Wal-Mart

Devin Rokyta/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

Wal-Mart takes its fair share of bashing from the public - and rightly so in many cases, as its business practices and treatment of employees are often questionable at best.

The retailing giant, however, deserves recognition for its announcement last week that it would ask its meat, seafood, poultry, deli and egg suppliers to adopt animal welfare standards that include sufficient space and easy access to food and water. Wal-Mart also said it would ask its suppliers to report on their use of antibiotics and limit use to sick animals.

Unfortunately, Wal-Mart's guidelines are just recommendations and the company did not set a timeline for suppliers to comply or indicate if companies that fail to act will face repercussions.

At first glance it is tempting to write off Wal-Mart's recommendations as merely window dressing and that no real change to the deplorable practices that exist throughout the industry will be forthcoming. It would be easy to say Wal-Mart was just grasping for good publicity.

The company, however, obviously has a great deal of sway - as do its consumers, many of whom are demanding to know more about their food and that animals are humanely treated. So, no matter what its motivations, the company and its clout have the ability to drive major changes quickly. And its decree, while compliance is currently only voluntary, is hopefully the beginning of the process to completely and permanently change industry practices. Producers wanting to sell to Wal-Mart and have long-term assurances that business will continue will be under great pressure to comply.

Wal-Mart isn't the first major corporation to announce such commitments. McDonald's, for instance, said in March it would begin using meat from chickens that are not raised using antibiotics important to human medicine. Its announcement was followed a month later with Tyson Foods, one of the largest suppliers of poultry in the nation, saying it would stop using such drugs in its operations by 2017. Now if it would only commit to humanely treating its chickens.

The slaughter of animals to feed the public is necessary, but there is no reason the animals can't be treated humanely. Wal-Mart took the first step to ensure this happens. Now the question is how will you respond when the price of your food increases?