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Animal rights fight heads to voters

Issue 2 would set up livestock care board

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COLUMBUS - Issue 2 sounds innocuous enough: It would amend Ohio's constitution to create a statewide board to develop standards for livestock care and safety.

But opponents see something more nefarious: an attempt to stop animal rights groups from getting their own statewide ballot initiative that would be far more protective of animals.

The question of how to care for cows and chickens is not something Ohioans usually vote on. But it's part of a national fight over animal rights.

In California, voters last year approved a proposition supported by the Humane Society allowing criminal charges against farmers for confining certain animals in a way that prevents them from turning around, standing up or lying down. Similar measures were approved by voters in Arizona and Florida.

The issue - placed on the Nov. 3 ballot by a joint resolution of the state legislature - may keep groups such as the Humane Society of the United States from proposing a ballot issue that would increase regulation over the livestock industry, according to legislators.

But animal rights groups think the statewide ballot issue doesn't go far enough to protect cows, chickens and other animals. They say those animals are harmed by Ohio's No. 1 industry, if housed in cramped, dirty or otherwise unsafe cages, pens or barns.

With Ohio voter approval Nov. 3, the joint resolution would create a 13-member standards board including farmers, veterinarians, consumer and humane society groups and scientists. Members would work to create standards for biosecurity on farms, animal disease prevention, food safety and cost controls.

Issue 2 is backed by Republican and Democratic leaders of the Ohio House and Senate, plus Gov. Ted Strickland, a Democrat. The Ohio Farm Bureau and the state's other major agricultural groups are campaigning for its passage. The Farm Bureau argues that Issue 2 offers a far more comprehensive plan for livestock standards than the piecemeal approach pushed by out-of-state advocacy groups. The amendment doesn't dictate or suggest what the standards should be, but gives broad authority for oversight to the 13-member board.

The Farm Bureau's lobbyist, Keith Stimpert, said the board would consult with animal behaviorists, scientists, veterinarians and other experts to think through a thorough plan for livestock care and develop standards to control disease and other food science issues. "We're going to assemble a panel of knowledgeable people," he said. "It's important to take a very thoughtful approach to the issue."

But state Rep. Michael Skindell, a Democrat from Lakewood, says agribusiness interests are working with the General Assembly to block regulations that would require more humane treatment of animals: room for chickens to spread their wings in cages or cows to lie down in barns.

Additional Facts

Who's for and against

The Ohio Farm Bureau, Gov. Ted Strickland, Senate President Bill Harris, R-Ashland, and House Speaker Armond Budish, D-Beachwood, support the article to the Constitution that creates the livestock board. Farm groups are expected to spend \$2 million to \$7 million advertising in favor of Issue 2, including hiring the Columbus-based Cochran Group, a public relations firm.

The Ohio Farmers Union voted to oppose the amendment.

The Ohio Environmental Stewardship Alliance, a statewide network of citizens' groups, also has announced opposition.

The Ohio Environmental Council does not support Issue 2 and is crafting a formal policy position.

Some national groups, such as Food and Water Watch, have indicated serious concerns.