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EDITORIAL: The big one

In mid-February, the Humane Society of the United States had the last word in its long argument with the meat industry over the use of gestation crates: In a joint press release, McDonald's joined HSUS, saying its pork suppliers would have to make the shift to group housing.

Actually, HSUS won the argument years ago. Cargill and Smithfield, who together account for more than one-third of the processed pork market, long ago committed to replacing gestation crates, although they are moving much more slowly than HSUS would like.

The activist organization more recently has targeted Tyson, Hormel and Seaboard in efforts to secure more such promises. But linking arms with McDonald's effectively ends any prevarication. Game over. For any pork producer still on the fence, the McDonald's announcement makes the move inevitable, whether or not they are a McD's supplier.

HSUS's partnership with McDonald's is a game-changer, in no small part because of how it resonates with the end-user. Consider the success that Chipotle has had marketing its policy of serving up humanely treated proteins: Even with annual sales of \$2.3 billion, most large processors still consider the company a niche player, the fast-food choice of well-heeled liberals (albeit a fast-growing one).

McDonald's, on the other hand, collects \$27 billion of the global middle class's income annually. Its size is enough to silence most would-be naysayers — especially if they ever dream of becoming a supplier of the 250 million pounds of pork the company buys every year. More important, though, is the brand name's appeal across every demographic, culture and political group on the planet.

Tapping that source of influence is a move that HSUS has executed flawlessly. In a classic example of, "If you don't like the answer, change the question," the organization has rendered academic any discussion of whether group housing is truly better for the animals than gestation crates. McDonald's gets what McDonald's wants.

For its part, McDonald's has almost as much to gain from the alliance as the activists: Even as most consumers eat at the restaurants on a regular basis, its menu is under constant scrutiny for nutritional value and the quality of its food sources. The chain benefits by linking arms with the group seen by McDonald's customers as the white knight of animal welfare.

What the general public doesn't understand, of course, is that while they applaud the shift to group housing, they conveniently are exempt from discussing the cost of doing so. And nowhere in their announcement does HSUS or McDonald's address the role these added costs are likely to play in the ongoing consolidation of the pork production industry.

From 1992 to 2004, the number of hog farms in the U.S. dropped from more than 240,000 to fewer than 70,000, according to USDA's Economic Research Service. Meanwhile, the number of hogs overall stayed the same, at about 60 million, and so the share of farms with 2,000 head or more grew to nearly 80 percent in 2004 from about one-third in 1992.

Even as the farms are retrofitted to accommodate the activists' and consumers' demands, then, the impetus for those farms — concentrated animal feeding operations — to get larger and more concentrated gets stronger.

Call it the law of unintended consequences.

But call it, also, an opportunity to educate. Consumers have learned that they can demand, and in fact deserve, more information about their food than they have in the past. HSUS, or even McDonald's, isn't the only party with a story to tell them.