

A conversation with Ben Goldsmith of Farm Forward on April 22, 2014

Participants

- Ben Goldsmith – Executive Director, Farm Forward
- Eliza Scheffler – Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Mr. Goldsmith.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mr. Goldsmith about Farm Forward's current projects to promote farm animal welfare and its future plans.

History of Farm Forward (FF)

Before the creation of Farm Forward (FF), Mr. Goldsmith collaborated with Aaron Gross, a professor of religious studies, and Jonathan Safran Foer, a novelist, on an animal welfare campaign. Mr. Foer later wrote the book *Eating Animals*, with help from Professor Gross and Mr. Goldsmith.

Professor Gross and his father, Steven Gross, had experience doing volunteer advocacy to reform factory farming. Steven, a business consultant and professor of psychology, helped refine methods of corporate campaigning to improve animal welfare. Professor Gross has played a leadership role in a variety of national and international farmed animal welfare campaigns in the Americas, South Asia, and the Middle East since the mid-1990s, and has been involved in the development of Animal Studies as an academic discipline.

Seeing the need for an organization devoted entirely to ending factory farming and creating humane and sustainable alternatives to it, Professor Gross founded Farm Forward in 2006. The Gross' were interested in creating an organization to pursue these goals; together with Mr. Goldsmith, they founded FF.

Structure of FF

In 2013, FF's revenue was approximately \$300,000. FF has thousands of small donors and a few major ones. FF has not received ongoing financial support from an external institution, but the large animal welfare organizations have given FF grants for some of its programs.

The leaders of FF are cautious about funding unproven projects, and they spend very little money on fundraising. By far the largest expense for FF is salaries for its staff, though their salaries are relatively low.

FF has five full-time staff members. Other than Mr. Goldsmith, who is the Executive Director, one staff member works on BuyingPoultry.com (see below), another serves as a consultant and General Counsel, another manages social networking and advertising, and

the fifth is an administrative assistant. FF also relies on the work of volunteers and part-time project coordinators.

BuyingPoultry.com

FF's most ambitious public campaign is a website called BuyingPoultry.com, which will launch in fall 2014. BuyingPoultry.com provides information to consumers on practices in the poultry industry, poultry brands that promote animal welfare, and alternatives to poultry products. FF wants to create similar resources for all types of farm animals, but it chose to test the model initially with poultry. It has taken over five years to launch the website because FF lacked enough funding and other resources. The website required FF to hire someone with relevant experience to work full-time on the project.

Animal welfare certification

One of the goals of BuyingPoultry.com is to address confusion that consumers may have regarding animal welfare certifications. There are various certifiers, each with its own set of standards. It is very difficult to develop standards, because there is much disagreement among experts and farmers on best practices. Culturally accepted practices can be difficult to change. While there has been significant scientific research on how to raise animals efficiently, there has been little research on how to maximize animal welfare. The certifiers need additional funding and expertise to improve their work. FF has done some work to improve certifications, but Mr. Goldsmith wants the organization to do more.

Certifications need to find a balance between focusing on outcomes (such as apparent health of the animals) and focusing on specific metrics of environmental and physiological conditions (such as how much space is allotted to each animal). It may be effective to have a variety of certifications, with each applying to a different situation. For example, there could be one certification for small producers that provide their animals with very high-welfare conditions, and another certification for mainstream producers.

Advocacy

In addition to influencing consumer purchases, one of the goals of BuyingPoultry.com is to raise awareness of poor conditions on factory farms. BuyingPoultry.com aims to make consumers aware of how limited the options for high-welfare poultry products are, given that more than 99% of poultry products in the U.S. are from animals raised on factory farms. The website will make it easy for consumers to take action by sharing information or emailing producers and retailers.

BuyingPoultry.com also intends to promote concern for animals in the poultry industry. People generally have less concern for the welfare of chickens and turkeys than for the welfare of other farm animals, such as cattle. FF hopes that BuyingPoultry.com will facilitate greater concern and awareness for poultry animals.

Heritage poultry

The animal agriculture industry has made significant changes to the genetics of chickens and other poultry animals, more than to most non-poultry animals. This causes farmed birds to grow so quickly that they are nearly guaranteed to have poor welfare, regardless of their environment. Humanely raising chickens requires the preservation of “heritage poultry” breeds (older breeds of poultry that are endangered).

It is difficult to promote concern for the preservation of diversity within poultry genetics, since the issue appears fairly abstract to consumers. FF chose to work on this issue because it knew of no other organization that was doing so. Since then, other organizations have also begun to focus on poultry genetics, and there has been greater public awareness. The poultry industry has also acknowledged these issues.

Academic projects

Some of the most successful social justice movements started in academia, so Professor Gross works on animal welfare advocacy in academic contexts, some of which is supported by FF. Aaron has written two books in the emerging field of animal studies, which is the interdisciplinary study of interactions between humans and animals.

FF is also working with a university to produce a scientific report on issues of animal welfare in factory farming.

Corporate campaigns

As Chairman of the Board, Steven has focused on corporate campaigns because of his expertise in the subject. Early on in his volunteer advocacy, Steven assisted with the creation of a corporate campaigns department at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). In that role, Steven attended shareholder meetings for major food corporations and was very successful in forming relationships with the companies. This model has since been imitated by other animal welfare organizations.

Work with culture-makers

FF works with “culture-makers,” prominent public figures such as Mr. Foer, who care about farm animal welfare and are able to speak to large audiences. FF provides the resources for them to speak effectively on these issues.

Jonathan Safran Foer

FF organizes virtual visits from Mr. Foer to classrooms around the world. During a visit, Mr. Foer gives a short presentation on farm animal welfare and answers questions from students. FF also provides free lesson plans and copies of *Eating Animals* to schools that have limited funds. Unlike many of FF’s programs, this program can be evaluated using concrete goals and metrics, such as number of books distributed and students reached.

FF is involved in the production of a documentary based on Mr. Foer’s book, *Eating Animals*.

Consulting services

For farmers

FF consults for farmers who provide humane treatment for their animals. It assists with business plans, brand-building, and marketing, and has created a loan program for high-welfare farmers. As the loans are repaid—and as interest accrues—additional loans will be granted to progressive farmers.

For other farm animal welfare organizations

FF is the only organization that Mr. Goldsmith is aware of that provides *pro bono* or at-cost consulting services to farm animal welfare organizations. FF uses its experience with farm animal welfare campaigns to guide other organizations in using resources most efficiently.

Identifying the most important projects in animal welfare

There are many organizations that focus on animal welfare. Though some organizations work independently to identify the most important projects in animal welfare, others work more collaboratively and are willing to share information and resources. In the past, organizations have tended to protect their own work and were unlikely to discuss it with other groups, but this has changed recently.

FF is able to think critically about long-term issues of effectiveness in animal welfare because it is a small organization and has a broad mandate to combat factory farming. FF is trying to find important issues in farm animal welfare that other organizations do not address, using an analytical approach that focuses on quantifiable metrics of success.

Future projects for FF

FF's three-year plan includes scaling up existing projects and an expansion into international efforts to limit the spread of factory farming. Any of FF's programs could be scaled up. For example, the advertising budget for BuyingPoultry.com could be doubled, and the budget for publicizing Mr. Foer's virtual visits and providing books to low-income schools could be more than doubled.

FF plans to create a program to promote the importance of heritage poultry to farmers and chefs, as part of its efforts to promote animal production techniques other than factory farming.

Why FF does not actively promote veganism/vegetarianism

Though Mr. Goldsmith supports a vegan diet as an effective way to increase animal welfare, FF does not focus on advocacy for veganism/vegetarianism. FF wants to work on projects that are not being pursued by other organizations.

FF believes that promoting veganism/vegetarianism is one of many important strategies for promoting farm animal welfare and that the use of multiple strategies could make the

animal welfare movement more effective. FF tries to find a balance between reducing the consumption of animals and improving conditions for farm animals.

Organizations doing related work

There are other organizations that support small farmers, but most focus on sustainability issues rather than animal welfare. One such organization is the Cornucopia Institute.

There are many organizations doing important work related to farm animal welfare, such as Compassion in World Farming (CIWF), ASPCA, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Mercy For Animals (MFA), and Farm Sanctuary.

Abolitionist organizations

Abolitionists are people who believe that it is inherently morally wrong for humans to own animals and use them for human purposes. Though many animal welfare organizations collaborate with one another, some abolitionist organizations refuse to cooperate with efforts to reform farming practices, believing that these undermine the goal of ending the use of animals for food. Though FF agrees with many of the goals of abolitionist organizations, it uses different tactics from many abolitionists. For example, bans on gestation crates, which have prevented a large amount of suffering, were enacted by cooperating with the factory farming industry. These efforts have been so successful that gestation crates are close to being completely removed from the industry. This kind of change might not have happened or might have taken longer to achieve using an abolitionist strategy.

Other people and organizations that GiveWell could speak to

- Aaron Gross – Founder and CEO, Farm Forward
- Bruce Friedrich – Senior Policy Director, Farm Sanctuary
- Matthew Prescott – Food Policy Director, HSUS (Mr. Prescott does corporate outreach for HSUS)
- Laurie Beacham – Senior Director, Strategy & Campaigns, Anti-Cruelty Group, ASPCA
- Leah Garces – USA Director, Compassion in World Farming
- Mercy for Animals (MFA)
- Animal Legal Defense Fund (ALDF)
- The Humane League (THL)

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