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Humane society's tactic

The Toronto Humane Society is run by a slick bunch of promoters.

They want laws that will crack down on what they call factory farming.

But their ideas are not likely to sell to a Tory caucus in Ottawa that is conservative, rural and favors deregulation.

So the society has taken note of two things the Tories have been pushing — free trade and competitiveness — and has woven its lobby into those themes.

The smooth tactics are contained in a brief the society submitted to the House of Commons sub-committee on regulations and competitiveness.

This sub-committee has chosen Agriculture Canada as one of the first departments for review, and the aim is to identify rules and regulations that hinder Canada's competitive position, and to either water them down or get rid of them altogether.

The brief from the humane society begins by noting that Canada's agriculture industry and animals "play a significant role in the Canadian economy" and adds that "the potential exists for substantial gains to be made for Canadian agriculture in an internationally liberalized trading environment."

This is the kind of line the Tories will love. Then the brief says "Canada's competitive position is under threat. Import restrictions that discourage market access and various direct and indirect agricultural subsidies that distort trade have a direct impact on the health of Canadian agriculture."

Smooth.

"If Canada's agri-food industry is to take advantage of any future liberalization, producers and processors must adopt a pro-active position in order to prepare for a new international trading environment," the brief says.

That's exactly what the Tories have been saying, and what the sub-committee is all about.

Then comes the twist.

"This environment will be governed by new rules, standards and codes of practice," the humane society says.



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Jim Romahn

And then it points to Europe as the trend-setting area.

Slowly, deftly building point on point, the brief eventually gets down to the nitty gritty — that Switzerland has banned the housing of laying hens in cages, that Sweden has "passed legislation which liberated cattle, pigs and chickens from the restrictions of factory farming methods. Denmark has legislated minimum living space requirements for chickens. Britain banned the use of veal crates."

This leads the society to its conclusion, which is a quote from John Thompson, executive director of the Mackenzie Institute: "If our farmers are not subject to the same animal rights legislation that Europeans face, technically they possess an unfair advantage. I think the pre-emptive action we should take to avoid this situation is obvious."

The society therefore recommends that Canada change all of its laws and regulations to provide "at least equal protection" for animals "to that of ... the European Economic Community."

The society is also recommending that the federal government grab jurisdiction so there won't be different provincial standards.

So how should the politicians deal with this brief?

I have a suggestion: tell the Toronto Humane Society's leaders that just as soon as they can sell their ideas to the Americans, Canada will — in the interests of harmonization and competitiveness — give their proposals serious consideration.

Stockyards plans

After some prodding from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the Ontario Stock Yards has sent along a copy of a briefing for Ontario