

# Finding Common Ground With Vegan Activists at Factory Farming Panel

Guest Post – Kristeena Patsche

Last Thursday, I decided to put all my emotions aside and attend the “[Factory Farming in Minnesota: Time for a Change](#)” panel at the Minnesota State University campus in Mankato. I knew agriculture needed representing, even though I didn’t feel I would make an impact. And little did I know that I would find common ground with vegan activists.

Much of the event went just like I suspected – emotional, one-sided, and no evidence to support their claims. But it wasn’t until after the event ended that I realized why I needed to be there ...

I saw a group of students toward the front of the auditorium, talking to an older farmer I had known. Interested in what they were talking about, I made my way in their direction, not knowing what I was getting myself into. As I got closer, I realized I was walking into a highly emotional conversation about how we raise our animals and the effects of today’s agriculture practices between a farmer and a group of vegan and vegetarian students, much against modern agriculture, or “factory farming.”

To be honest, I was intimidated by this situation. They weren’t that much younger than me, but I knew their mind was set on their beliefs. That’s when I realized I wasn’t there to change their minds, but rather to have a conversation. I turned to a group of six or so students sitting there and decided it’s *time to talk* - a real conversation. One where I could hear from them and they could hear from me.

Here’s what I learned ...

## 1. We have a common ground.

Sometimes it isn’t about the big details, but rather the little ones. We both agreed we cared for the environment – our land, water and limited resources. We both want it protected because at the end of the day, we will all live with the consequences of unsafe water and unhealthy soil.

Another common ground? GMOs! Can you believe it? One of the students said, “GMOs are pretty cool.” You can about image how my face lit up.

The ability to find this common ground was the start to a great conversation.

## 2. “Factory Farming” doesn’t have an actual definition.

Throughout the entire event, I kept asking myself, “What is factory farming?” I decided this was the opportunity to learn from them. So I asked. Not to tell them if they were right or wrong, but to learn. Here are a few of the responses I got:

- Mass production (but couldn't tell me what that number would be)
- Whether they are raised in a confinement barn or crates
- Raising animals to make a profit

I made a point not to defend their responses, but take it in. Sometimes it's just as important to give them the chance to explain their thoughts versus always being ready with an answer to defend it.

### **3. Civil conversations go so much further . . .**

Throughout our 20-30 minute conversation, I was told at least three times they were so grateful I was willing to have a civil conversation about this emotional topic. With being around their age, they seemed more open to ask questions about GMOs to antibiotic use to manure application to how our pigs are housed. If you keep calm, they will too. This keeps an open dialogue and allows them to feel comfortable asking more questions.

### **4. It's okay not to know the answer.**

I didn't know all the answers they were looking for, and that's okay. I made a point to say, “I honestly don't know,” rather than making up an answer they could see right through. I will never pretend to be an expert on the environmental impact of livestock farming on climate change or greenhouse gases. But the biggest takeaway was knowing what their concerns are and what we in agriculture can do a better job at communicating.

### **5. Sometimes you just need to agree to disagree.**

At the end of the day, there are things you just won't agree upon. The students I talked to were set to believe livestock animals, pet animals and humans should be treated equally, with livestock held to the same standard as our family members. Growing up on a farm, where our pigs were raised to supply food for our family and many others, this is a hard concept to grasp. But it also isn't one that I will ever try to fight. There is no evidence to back up either of our choices, it's what makes all of us different. So we agreed to disagree. Simple as that.

Looking back on last night, it wasn't the event itself I will remember, but the *opportunity to be in the right place at the right time to have a voice for agriculture*. Am I going to change the minds of those vegan and vegetarian students that farming is great and they should eat meat? Probably not. But that wasn't my intention. I walked away now learning more about their concerns, while giving them a chance to ask questions. That's how I made my impact.

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It's those moments I'm proud to represent agriculture and find myself eager to jump into more of those hard situations.

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