Human interaction with other animal species cohabitating the planet is as old as time, but being redefined day by day. Our ancestors hunted other animals as food. Humans then recognized animals as possible sources of clothing to protect them from the elements, as fuel to light their lamps, bones from which to carve tools and jewelry, and eventually even sources of medically important compounds such as insulin. Interestingly many of the same species (or their antecedents) that were hunted by our prehistoric forefathers are now kept in zoos as a source of entertainment. Man recognized the utility of domestication and a variety of wild animals were selectively bred over the millennia to more readily meet the demand for animal protein in human diets. Humans saw the advantages of using animals to meet their transport needs; being able to cover greater distance and haul larger quantities of goods. Animals were trained to help provide protection for both people and their belongings including other animals. This complex and multi-purpose role of animals in human life provided the opportunity for animals to emerge as companions. The depths of these interactions seem to know no bounds as pets in many households have achieved family member status.

As the diversity and degree of human engagement with animals continues to evolve so has the role of veterinarians in society. Our original purpose was to help ensure a safe and plentiful food supply. A century ago 25% of our population was engaged in agriculture, but now less 2% of the populace is required to feed us. Reflecting these efficiencies in the agricultural sector, upwards of 80% of veterinary practitioners currently work with companion animals. Society’s view towards animal welfare also continues to evolve as the roles that animals play are redefined. The disparate roles that animal play in our lives has left a patchwork of animal welfare expectations across our society. Farm animal welfare often has emerged as a point of divergence between those that are involved in the day-to-day care of livestock and those that are not. These changing expectations of society about animal agriculture are often perceived as a challenge, if not an intrusion, by most large animal veterinarian’s clients, the farmers.

Both legislative initiatives and market forces are at play to translate these societal expectations into changes on the farm. Today in America ten states have enacted laws that prohibit the use of several traditional animal husbandry practices such as battery cages or gestation stalls. However over 70 nationally branded food companies also have vowed to remove farms that employ practices such as these from their supply chain. The impact of these market forces is more far reaching than that of the legislative initiatives and are currently driving unprecedented change on the farm.

With these changes to animal agriculture come a variety of emerging opportunities for veterinarians. These opportunities can be lumped in a handful of job categories such as auditor,
coach, management consultant, and subject expert for companies both pre- and post-harvest. As these changes are occurring on the farm, consumers and others want assurances that the changes are actually happening and in some cases having the intended outcomes. Thus, a host of third party audit schemes have emerged to help reassure the public that their welfare concerns are being addressed on the farm. Typically farmers may have the opportunity to sell their animals or animal products in to niche markets at a premium. However, access to these markets requires that the farmer be audited and certified according to certain standards by a third party audit company. A variety of companies have devised standards to address certain welfare concerns and offer certification programs including the Global Animal Partnership, Certified Humane, Humane Heartland and Animal Welfare Approved to name a few. Many veterinarians have completed the training offered by the Professional Animal Auditor Certification Organization (PAACO) and are qualified to work as auditors for these third party groups. Another opportunity that springs from these certification programs is that as certification program coach. Most of these certification programs have rather detailed expectations about farm practices and often required fairly extensive documentation of these practices. As such there are opportunities for veterinarians to develop the expertise in helping farms transition from conventional practices to a niche market certified program. A detailed knowledge of the particular standards, and some experiences with solutions to meet the expectation of the standards as well as insight in to how best to document the practices are important to the success of such certification coaches.

Beyond the niche markets, farmers may have to adapt change just to maintain their place at the table in commodity markets. This may require changes to current management schemes and or facilities. While some veterinarians may become involved in the design and construction of facilities to help producers retain market access, there is even larger opportunities to help farmers with the implementation of changes. It is important that the facility design is correct for cage-free hens or group housed sows. However in the end it is the people who make these new facilities work and there is tremendous opportunity for veterinarians to work as management consultants helping farmers to implement these new practices.

Finally there is also opportunity with in companies engaged in the food business both pre- and post-harvest. Many livestock or poultry production companies that work with live animals and produce animal agriculture products need welfare expertise. These companies often develop their own welfare program to assure customers and someone is need to oversee these programs to ensure that the policies are being enacted across often a production company that may have a large geographic foot print. The same is true post-harvest as companies that are producing food also need some sort of welfare expertise to be sure that the animals or animal products they buy meet the specific welfare standards that the food company has adopted. Veterinarians are more and more filling these types of positions both pre- and post-harvest.

The American College of Animal Welfare was recently sanctioned by the AVMA as a veterinary specialty. It provides post-graduate training in the area of animal welfare with a goal to create veterinarians with the knowledge and credentials to be welfare experts. Achieving board certification in animal welfare promises to ideally position veterinarians to capture most if not all the opportunities described above.