Earlier this year, a headline in *The New York Times* set off a firestorm in both the livestock industry and the research community. "U.S. Research Lab Lets Livestock Suffer in Quest for Profit," the headline read. The laboratory at the heart of the story was a U.S. Department of Agriculture facility in southeast Nebraska where research is conducted on farm animals. The goal of the USDA's Meat Animal Research Center is to improve the efficiency of production while also maintaining the quality of meat products.

But the article raised questions about whether the welfare of animals at the facility was being compromised — for example, by breeding research that has led to “weakened or deformed” calves and crowded conditions that are causing piglets to be crushed.

In response, animal-welfare organizations called for shutting down the facility and even ending all animal agriculture research across the country. And federal legislation was introduced to include farm animals under the Animal Welfare Act, the law that governs research use of laboratory animals.

“People who understand agriculture were devastated by the accusations [in the article],” says Nebraska Sen. John Kuehn. “The employees who work 24/7, through all kinds of weather to ensure that the animals are well cared for, felt shattered — their efforts diminished.”

Kuehn’s district includes the Meat Animal Research Center. But he also has a personal connection: A veterinarian, he spent part of his education training at the facility. The 11-state Midwest is home to 17 USDA agriculture research centers (see map), which employ more than 1,400 people and have operating budgets of more than $600 million.

Nebraska’s Meat Animal Research Center employs more than 100 people, but Sen. Al Davis says it means much more than direct jobs in his state — the nation’s No. 1 producer of red meat.

“[It] provides our producers with access to cutting-edge research,” he says. Kuehn notes, too, that the center’s research into animal genomes has helped lead “to the biotech revolution of today.” Operated under a cooperative agreement between the University of Nebraska and the USDA, the center houses more than 30,000 animals and is conducting some of the longest-running genetic and production research trials in the world.

In praising the work of the research center, Sens. Davis and Kuehn also take issue with some of the reporting in the *Times* article. For example, it mentioned the “unsettling side effects” of developing a herd of twinning cows — female calves born with deformed reproductive tracts. For cattle producers, though, the presence of “freemartins” (the term used for these heifers) is as old as cattle-raising itself.
“That research herd gave me the opportunity to learn how to manage multiple births, something most veterinary students never see,” Kuehn says about his own personal experiences at the USDA facility. “The center, the only one of its kind in the world, provided training for thousands of veterinarians, resulting in saving hundreds of thousands of animals.”

The article also chastised research that increased lamb production with triplets, but there are commercial breeds of sheep that often produce triplets or quadruplets. And the center provides producers with production methods to save the lives of these multiple births.

The panel of outside researchers found no evidence of animal mistreatment at the center: “Without exception, the panel observed healthy and well-cared-for animals.”

The panel, however, found that there was a lack of documentation on employee-training programs and said more accountability is needed at the center to ensure that animal-welfare standards are upheld. Until these administrative deficiencies are corrected, a moratorium on new research projects is in place.

The USDA has also appointed an animal-welfare ombudsman and authorized new training for all who work with animals in Agriculture Research Service labs. (The University of Nebraska-Lincoln holds accreditation from the leading animal-care association, indicating that the university’s standards exceed federal requirements.)