

Proving feedlot animal welfare

by Debbie Furber Oct. 3, 2014

In an effort to assure consumers some retail and food-service companies are auditing the animal welfare procedures of packing plants. The packers, in turn, are starting to ask feedlots for signed affidavits stating their operations meet accepted standards.

“What we don’t want to see happen is retailers and packers coming out with different animal welfare programs because it creates chaos and confusion if feedlots have to do something one way for one packer and another way for another packer,” says Dr. Joyce Van Donkersgoed, a feedlot veterinarian from Coaldale, Alta., who is project manager for the National Cattle Feeders Association’s (NCFA) Canadian Feedlot Animal Assessment Program.

Fortunately, three major packers of Canadian fed cattle — Cargill, JBS and Tyson — feel the same way and are on an advisory committee developing the NCFA welfare assessment program along with the Canadian Cattlemen’s Association, Quebec Beef Producers Federation and Alberta Milk Producers, an Alberta feedlot owner, a beef retailer, a Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals veterinarian, three feedlot veterinarians, two animal behaviour specialists (etiologists) and a transportation consultant.

Several members, including Van Donkersgoed, are trained auditors for the Professional Animal Auditor Certification Organization (PAACO), which audits the welfare program developed by the American Meat Institute (AMI) for plants that process cattle, swine and sheep in the U.S. and Canada. Four were on the committee that recently updated the beef cattle code of practice.

The National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) is also providing input. It oversees the codes of practice for all species and earlier this year published an Animal Care Assessment Framework for use by industry associations.

Ultimately, the committee will seek the NFACC’s stamp of approval to put this assessment program forward as the standard for Canada.

“It is a big project, but we didn’t have to reinvent everything because we don’t have to debate the code and we have the AMI animal-handling audit guide to follow for structure,” Van Donkersgoed explains.

After the initial committee meeting in January Van Donkersgoed and Dr. Karen Schwartzkopf-Genswein of the Lethbridge Research Centre wrote a draft package which has been reviewed twice already by committee members. The final version was to be worked out at their September meeting.

Once approved it will be ground proofed at indoor and outdoor feedlots across the country. The data collected during this pilot phase will be used to establish benchmarks for acceptable animal

care targets and seek out areas where more research is needed to bolster the standard.

Once the testing is wrapped up next spring, the manual and supporting material will be finalized and posted on the NCFA website by fall 2015.

What's in it?

"Sometimes we maybe think we are doing things right, but could find out, oops, we're not, so this is a way to identify areas that need to be improved," she says. "Nobody needs surprises of the sort that grab news headlines. People don't forget those images."

The manual includes supporting information, but the checklist is concise, objective and based on the best science available, plus real feedlot data. It explains what to look for, how to assess it and what's acceptable.

You'll be answering yes or no questions, measuring and counting things, such as how many slips, falls, bellows and prods animals experience coming off the truck and in the chute, and scoring things, such as the condition of the handling facilities, pens and cattle in the pens, she explains.

The transportation guidelines mirror AMI's animal-handling guide as closely as possible for consistency in the standards between feedlots and packing plants.

There is zero tolerance for wilful acts of abuse, and infractions result in an automatic fail on an audit.

Critical areas include access to feed and water, animal health and feed protocols, animal husbandry (use of low-stress animal handling, proper procedures and pain medications when possible for castrating and dehorning), euthanasia, and staff/owner training.

The parts of the horse code of practice that apply to the welfare of feedlot working horses are also included. "This is a way to identify areas that need to be improved." – Dr. Joyce Van Donkersgoed, veterinarian, Coaldale, Alta.

Some written records are necessary, but overall many feedlots have protocols and records in place so it may mean adding only a few requirements here and there.

Secondary criteria are recommended practices from the beef code of practice (feed testing for example), or code requirements that can't be objectively evaluated. Van Donkersgoed says it wouldn't be fair to fail an audit because of a subjective requirement.

The program will be free and voluntary, starting out as an educational program for feedlot producers. Self-assessments can be carried out by the owner, foreman or a related party, such as a feedlot veterinarian.

Beef packers have trained animal care auditors on staff who routinely conduct self-assessments of their own plants, just as their quality control personnel conduct food safety audits. They may

send their own animal care auditor or call a PAACO auditor to do feedlot assessments as required.

How often a feedlot can expect to be audited and who will pay for it has yet to be determined. Van Donkersgoed suspects packers may conduct random audits of their suppliers as required by their own customers. A feedlot may never be audited or could be selected as often as every year based on the volume of fed cattle it sells, or when an animal care issue is identified by the packing plant.

It is hoped that these audit reports will be recognized by all packers to avoid multiple audits at a feedlot within the same year.

What is its importance?

The first is profit. "Improving animal care creates profit," she says, since injured or sick animals take a big bite out of returns.

Ultimately, successful welfare audits will have a bearing on a feedlot's ability to market cattle in Canada and other countries. By way of example she recalls the visit of a European Union delegation to a large Alberta feedlot. Seemingly satisfied with Canada's food safety standards, all of their questions focused on animal welfare, mainly the use of electric prods, pain medication and castration.

The second is employee retention. "Animal welfare affects employee morale," says Van Donkersgoed. A culture of rough handling, or casual abuse can cost you good employees who care about the animals in their care. She urges feedlot operators to deal with this kind of behaviour as it occurs with training. Some employees will no doubt need consistent reinforcement when trying to change behaviour.

Van Donkersgoed allows they may encounter some resistance from owners who resent any interference in their business, but on the whole feedlot operators see the value in having a standardized method of proving to themselves and others that they are doing a good job of raising beef.