

Managing Welfare: On-farm Animal Care Assessment for Pigs

Penny Lawlis

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), 667 Exeter Rd, London, ON N6E 1L3; **Email:** penny.lawlis@omaf.gov.on.ca

■ Introduction - Why Measure?

Consumers are becoming increasingly more concerned about animal welfare and want assurances that animals raised for food are handled in appropriate ways (Wemelsfelder & Lawrence, 2001). Retailers expect producers to adhere to the Codes of Practice and laws governing the humane treatment of farm animals.

Pig Massage and Helping Ducks Preen: Who Says We're Heartless Carnivores?

David Barboza, New York Times, September 28, 2003

For decades, animal welfare research was, according to this story, largely dismissed by farmers and food producers. But in the past few years, under pressure from animal rights advocates and consumers concerned about the rapid growth of mega-farms, some of the world's biggest food companies, including McDonald's, Wendy's and Tyson Foods, have begun to hire animal welfare specialists.

In 2002, the Canadian Pork Council (CPC) formed an animal care working group to consider this issue and to develop an appropriate on-farm welfare assessment for the Canadian swine industry.

■ Goals

The goal of any assessment program will affect the way in which a program is designed (Johnsen, et al., 2001). The goal of a welfare assessment may be to

certify the level of welfare on specific farms, compare the welfare in different production systems or serve as an advisory tool that allows farmers to identify, prevent or rectify welfare problems on the farm.

The CPC animal care working group agreed that the goal of the Canadian on-farm assessment will be to serve as the foundation of a swine animal welfare program and as a valuable tool for producers. Completion of the on-farm assessment will help to identify areas on the farm which compromise welfare as well as, over time, identifying changes (both positive and negative) in animal welfare (Sørensen et al., 2001).

The working group agrees that animal welfare must be viewed within the context of other goals (i.e., food safety) and that the animal care assessment program will most likely be incorporated into the on-farm food safety program.

■ The Approach

The key elements that would need to be included in an animal welfare assessment were identified using a HACCP approach as the framework and the Code of practice and addendum for content. Critical control points (CCP's) were considered relative to the vulnerability of pigs, the interaction between pigs and their environment and the interaction between pigs and stockpeople.

It is essential to find the important critical control points, but to not have too many things to measure (Grandin, 2003). The critical limits for each identified CCP must involve a measurable parameter. With this in mind, a thorough review of the existing Codes of Practice was undertaken to explore those points that could be taken and measured at the farm level.

Animal welfare can be assessed using environmental or animal based parameters. Environmental parameters describe such things as size of stalls, feeding and drinking facilities and space allowance. Animal based parameters record the animal's reaction to its environment using behaviour, health and physiology (Johnsen, et al., 2001).

■ The Program

With the goals and approach decided, the committee began a detailed examination of a rough draft of an on-farm assessment. The first CPC draft was developed using a combination of animal based and environmental and management based parameters (Johnsen, et al., 2001).

The first CPC draft included animal based welfare measures that are widely adopted throughout various segments of the livestock industry (e.g. body condition scoring) and mortality records. Space allowance and air quality are examples of the environmental parameters used.

Animal welfare is influenced by a combination of factors, such as environmental conditions, stockmanship and the type of production system (Bartussek 2001). For an assessment to work, you need measures that assess welfare under an enormous different set of circumstances (production systems). It's a big job, yet it is best to keep it as simple as possible.

The current on-farm assessment consists of four sections:

- **General:** This general section applies to all farms and includes sections on staff training, euthanasia, mortalities and transportation.
- **Sows and piglets:** This section applies to sow barns and nurseries only and will require that sows be scored for body condition.
- **Weaned pigs:** Weaned pigs require special care and this section will apply to any facility that handles weaned pigs.
- **Grow/Finish:** Facilities that feed from weaned to market weight will be required to fill out this section, along with the general section.

■ Next Steps

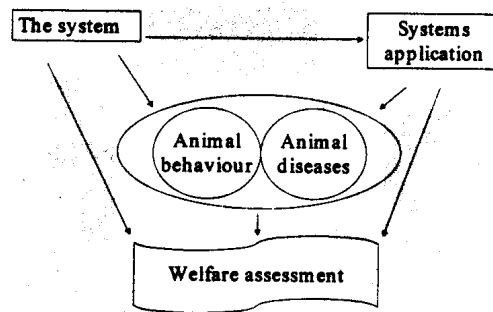
The next version of the on-farm animal welfare assessment needs to be tested in commercial herds across Canada to determine if the welfare indicators work at the farm level and for individual pigs. It is important that the results of the animal care on-farm assessment can be used by the producer as a decision-support tool. After completing the booklet, the producer should be provided with an overview of the current welfare state of their herd. The producer will then be able to use this information to provide staff training or to purchase new equipment (Johnsen, et al., 2001). This outcome will have to be tested in a practical setting.

The working group will ask producers to identify areas where they require more information. CPC will work to distribute available educational materials and to develop others to ensure that producers have the information and skills that they need to improve the welfare of pigs. Many of the practical aspects of the program (ie. who will do the auditing, how often will observations have to be recorded) need to be determined through open dialogue among producers and other interested stakeholders.

■ Conclusion

Animal welfare assessments must be based on information from several different sources within a given facility (**Figure 1**)(Sørensen et al 2001).

Figure 1: Sources of information for assessing animal welfare (Sørensen et al., 2001)



Animal welfare assessment at the farm level is useful for certification, quality assurance and for herd health management and as a decision support tool if the producer wishes to maintain or promote animal welfare in his or her herd (Johnsen, et al., 2001). The records generated through the completion of the on-farm animal welfare assessment should provide the producer with a valuable tool for evaluating animal welfare on his/her farm. The CPC animal care working group is committed to providing such a tool for Canadian producers and will continue with the development and implementation of this program.

■ References

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