

A Proactive Approach to Animal Welfare

William Ballantyne

Director Technical Services, Maple Leaf Pork, 2010 Winston Park Dr., Oakville, ON L6H 5R7
Email: ballanbi@mapleleaf.ca

■ Introduction

David Fraser in his 2001 address to this Seminar on the “Culture and Agriculture of Animal Production” indicated that sustainable food animal production would require re-focused research, leadership from the animal industries, and facilitation by government.

This paper will review two activities that update how the meat industry is responding to animal welfare demands of the market place. It is apparent that some very fundamental changes are taking place in Canada with how the industry approaches issues related to animal care.

■ Animal Welfare Audits by Customers

First, is to describe the extensive process of animal welfare audits that occurs at slaughter facilities if they wish to supply what could be considered some of their most desirable customers.

Customer animal welfare audits of pork processors began in 2001 in Canada. Initially, they were conducted by three major food service firms - Burger King, McDonalds, and Wendy's.

The audits were characterized by an emphasis on quantifiable and easily observable outcomes such as squeals, slips, falls, and blinking. The audit questions were similar and based on models developed by Drs. Temple Grandin, David Fraser, Harold Gonyou and other animal welfare specialists. The audits clearly avoided use of imprecise language in their descriptor terms.

While the request to audit animal handling practices came as a surprise for many processor Sales departments, the concept of audits by customers was not new. Animal welfare audits were simply another in a series of audits on

food safety, ingredient use, storage facilities and processes that were already part of the buying programs at many firms.

Essentially every meat customer now does an audit or demands that we have an internal program.

■ **Some Reactions**

Probably every firm and every facility within the industry reacted differently to customer requests for animal welfare audits.

Senior management did not treat the request for audit negatively because it was a cost that all suppliers to those firms would bear, would apparently be conducted in an objective manner and would help the industry in sending a positive message to consumers. Choosing not to participate meant a plant or supplier was unlikely to remain on the approved list and that decision could be placed in a business context. The process also meant it was more likely that animal welfare would not become a marketing issue and that the focus would remain on animals and their circumstances.

From a processor's perspective, audits have a number of purposes. Over time, they tend to ensure that products or processes improve, that standards are maintained or improved in some orderly manner, and that inadequate performance can be documented and corrected by a supplier. Most audits are technical in nature and lead to improved acceptance and lower costs of product flow through a supply chain.

Processors are also already faced with Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) regulations and on-going assessment. Inspectors and veterinarians assess every animal. The issues of non-ambulatory animals has received increased attention and changes in regulation have brought a focus to plant receiving procedures.

Most Canadian facilities easily met the standards and passed audits conducted by the food service firms. But it quickly became clear that some practices were in need of review. Electrical prods were a major issue. Acceptable performance generally meant leaving the prod in a holder and switching to paddles and sweeper boards. Some facilities did not have appropriate lighting, ventilation, and flooring in their receiving and handling areas. Generally, however, it was a simple matter to comply with requirements.

Getting operations management on board was essential. Some facilities had to redo their animal handling training programs. It is difficult to fake performance and it is easily detectable if the staff are not well trained. Well-trained staff do not need to fake performance. Training individuals who want to work with animals is a lot easier than trying to turn someone who has little understanding or empathy for animals into a skilled stock person. Getting appropriate rewards for such personnel is still a struggle in a large organization.

A number of our facilities made use of external animal handling training services that had previously been focused on the transportation and production sectors. For many, this was a very beneficial step and some have made this process part of their Standard Procedures.

The scientific literature contains many references that good animal welfare is related to improved meat quality. While it happened a number of years prior to the introduction of customer audits, perhaps the biggest improvement to pig animal welfare at processing was eliminating the PSS stress gene from Canadian genetics. Animals showing fatigue, shortness of breath, and panic during handling has dropped dramatically.

Resting animals for a minimum number of hours after the stress of transport and receiving is still required for improved meat quality. So too, is proper pen design and the elimination of structural impediments.

■ Current Status

While all our facilities had animal handling protocols, we found it useful to implement an animal-handling audit structured on the quantifiable measures used by our customers. I believe all processors serving major retail and food service customers now operate an internal audit program.

We found that audit results often became used as the basis for changes to procedures and facilities. At times, internal auditors can become discouraged at the speed with which change is implemented. However, over the past five years, every one of our plants has made changes to facilities to improve animal welfare performance.

The means to track performance has become more complex. Perhaps one of the most innovative is the traffic light system created at one of the plants in which the light colour changes dependent upon measured noise levels

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at the particular workstation. A number of plants now use noise history as a means to monitor and explain performance.

Following an initial flurry of activity, the frequency of external audits has declined. Audits are also now more likely to be conducted by professional audit firms. Frequency is probably determined more by a program need or special situation.

My perspective is that an independent assessment would show that animal welfare at pork processing plants conforms to stiffened regulations, with what is expected by society's professionals in that area of science, and is much higher on management's radar screen. Animal welfare receives resources for training, is a prominent issue in changes at facilities (that also normally lead to improved meat quality), and generally allows employees to feel better about what we do. We have come a long way.

■ **Some Extras**

The Canadian Meat Council in cooperation with CFIA has for many years had Dr. Grandin and other specialists conduct audits in member processing facilities. As a practice, it has often done as much as anything else in keeping animal care in management site lines. There have been times when the industry has not been comfortable with the results, especially as they become public. However, participants clearly know when they miss industry standards and quickly make corrections.

Additionally, a number of processors, including our firm, have had Dr. Grandin and other experts into our plants to provide advice and comment prior to making any major change to barns or pen areas.

■ **Some Thoughts About the Future**

The OIE has noted that transportation of livestock, especially from western North America, is on their list of animal care issues. Time on trailers, weather extremes, and dual-purpose trailers are all situations about which many have strong opinions. We need credible research on local situations to ensure that our realities are clear and that we are resolving real issues.

It is very rare to observe the results of animal abuse in the receiving barn of a major packing plant. When most of the animals in a load are bruised, it is a bad sign. If cripples, DOAs (dead on arrival) and animals with extended hernias are at the back of the load, producers need a wakeup call. Such animals should be euthanized much earlier in their lives if appropriate

veterinarian treatment has not worked previously. They should not be showing up at a processing plant.

Animals that have had insufficient contact with barn staff walking in their pens are generally difficult to unload and very hard to handle at the processing plant. Some plants now ask producers to spend more time in the pens. The results are measurable.

Maple Leaf may have customers in the future that will want us to ask producers to do an animal welfare audit. However, from my perspective, we first need to make sure the Codes and the details to which an audit would refer are up to date. Certainly, it adds to the credibility of the Code alternative to have an audit program. Most other countries have gone the regulatory route. Codes with a practical audit component appear to me to be a much-preferred option. But, they do require some focused effort on the part of the industry.

■ A Second Initiative

The food animal industry has also been involved in the creation of a national organization focused on animal care in Canada. The National Farm Animal Care Council is composed of most commodity groups, the major national organizations representing red meat processors, poultry processors, retailers and food service firms, the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies, the Canadian Veterinarian Medical Association, a researcher representing Canadian universities, the Canadian Truckers Association and representatives of provincial and federal governments.

The primary objectives are to provide a means for communication and collaboration about common animal care issues of a national concern. The Council had its formative meeting on August 14th, 2005 and Gordon Coukell, representing the Dairy Farmers of Canada, was elected the first Chair.

One of the immediate issues is to assist in the development of processes required to up-date the Codes of Practice and to coordinate discussions of Code verification processes. All the groups at the table have a stake in being clear about what the Codes include, in agreeing what an audit process should confirm, and in making the system or process credible to the Canadian consumer.

There needs to be a process by which concerns can be clarified, options evaluated, alternatives proposed and if accepted, incorporated into a Code. This system needs a clearer mechanism for doing the required research and

recommending improvements to animal welfare. The alternative is regulation or loss of markets.

The National Farm Animal Care Council will also act as the coordinating group to create industry positions regarding trade developments. The OIE has started a process of defining animal welfare parameters as part of the WTO agreement. The National Council can act as a facilitator to ensure a reasoned and scientifically based voice is provided by the Canadian food animal industry to the Canadian representatives at such meetings.

■ **Conclusion**

In Canada, the food animal industry is given high ratings in consumer studies. There is no on-going issue with animal welfare.

Maintaining this consumer attitude and confidence is dependent on the industry participants taking a leadership role and performing in a certain manner.

Governments will not do this for us, nor should they be expected to do it for us. If governments must get involved, it will be to regulate.

Codes of Practice are a perfectly acceptable alternative in terms of how an industry can choose to set standards by which it operates. However, standards without external monitoring processes, verification or audit are not credible.

The Assessment Tool being proposed by pork producers is an excellent beginning.