

PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO ENSURE ANIMAL WELFARE ON FARMS

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ABSTRACT

Although animal welfare can be defined in terms of animals' feelings, determining how this is manifested on farms relies on professional judgement. Various guidelines, both general and specific have been developed that provide direction on ensuring good animal welfare on farms. To achieve this, managers must demonstrate that they place a high value on animal welfare through their practices. These include training programs for staff and high standards for animal care. Operations should be internally assessed using the Code of Practice, as well as externally using industry developed tools. Certain areas such as handling, treatment and euthanasia require specific attention. Issues such as handling facilities, space requirements and gestation housing should be part of long term planning.

INTRODUCTION

Our ethical obligation to the animals we raise relates to the balance of positive and negative experiences or feelings that they have. This is what is important to the animals, and that is how animal welfare has been defined (Duncan, 1996). Because of the difficulty assessing these feelings, we use a variety of behavioral, physiological and clinical measures to assess welfare in animal research. Transferring general knowledge and research findings to the farm involves professional judgement by researchers, veterinarians and consultants, and producers themselves. One of the most widely quoted set of welfare criteria resulting from such professional opinion is known as The Five Freedoms (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 1992):

1. Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition.
2. Freedom from discomfort.
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease.
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour.
5. Freedom from fear and distress.

Professional judgement, using research findings whenever possible, has been used in the development of numerous welfare documents specific to pig production, including the Code of Practice (AAFC, 1993). Tools to assess the welfare of pigs on farms, such as the proposed Swine Animal Care Assessment program of the Canadian Pork Council, are based on these welfare documents. The question we are addressing in this presentation is the application of these welfare principles to the care of pigs on our farms.

ATTITUDE

Based on her extensive experience within the animal industries, Grandin (2000) states unequivocally that the single most important factor that determines how animals are treated is the attitude of the manager. This attitude should flow throughout the organization, and is evident to all staff through the allocation of resources (time and money), and the standards set for animal care. Without leadership by management, animal welfare becomes dependent upon the personal standards of individual stockpersons, who receive no reward for their efforts in this area.

Hemsworth and Coleman (1998) have emphasized the importance of developing the attitude of the stockpersons toward animal welfare. Training of staff should include not only the technical aspects of caring for animals, but the importance of good care to animal welfare, productivity and job satisfaction. Communicating the importance of good animal care goes beyond the initial training period. Animal welfare should be mentioned in staff meetings, continuing education seminars, and throughout the work environment. The use of signs throughout the barn, reinforcing good handling practices, is a means of communicating the importance of animal care.

The attitude of the manager is evident in how the farm is operated. If staff receives training in animal care, if standards are established and enforced, if money is spent on appropriate facilities and repairs, then the staff will realize that management cares. If these practices are not evident, then staff will assume the opposite.

ASSESSMENT

The first step to improvement is assessment. A good starting point for any farm is to examine its practices against recognized standards. The Code of Practice (AAFC, 1993) contains a wealth of information and suggestions on achieving high levels of animal welfare on pig farms. As with any such document, the Code of Practice has fallen out of date in some areas, or is either not definitive enough or too specific in others, but it remains a valuable source of advice. Managers should engage in a process of comparing their operation to the recommendations of the Code of Practice. Where differences are found, the decision to change or retain those practices should be based on what is best for the animals' welfare. Farms that have done this have usually identified a number of practices that could be improved on their operations.

Both the Canadian Pork Council and the National Pork Board (U.S.) have developed tools to assess animal care on pig farms. These tools are designed to identify problems on farms and to encourage producers to address them. Over a period of time, with repeated assessments, the standard of animal care should improve on all farms, and the poorest producers will realize their status relative to the rest of the industry. Although these assessments are voluntary, it is anticipated that major customers may require them in future. Canadian Pork Council's Swine Animal Care Assessment may become part of the Canadian Quality Assurance program, which has a high level of uptake by the industry and its customers.

An important part of assessment is the day-to-day inspection of pigs and facilities. The daily routine of each stockperson must include identification of animal care problems such as illness, injury, lack of feed, and broken equipment. It must also be stressed that these problems are to be attended to immediately if it will alleviate suffering, or by the end of the day it they pose a risk to animal welfare. Problems should not be allowed to accumulate until an annual 'fix-up' day.

CRITICAL POINTS

There are a number of critical points that deserve special attention. These include situations in which suffering is already present or likely to occur if care is not taken. Animal handling represents one such critical activity. At the very least, we should be eliminating use of the electric prod on farms, including the loading area. Not only do the behavioural reactions of the pigs do so, but their physiological responses also indicate that use of the prod is painful and extremely aversive to pigs. Every stockperson should be trained on handling animals with the goal of eliminating the prod in mind. All handling situations should be examined to determine how to reduce the inclination to use the prod. The movement of pigs through all handling facilities, including scales, crowd pens, alleyways and loading ramps, should be observed by supervisory staff to identify problems and offer direction to the stockpersons. In particularly difficult situations a consultant should be brought in to provide advice on handling and facility improvements. The Banff Pork Seminar recently recognized the importance of such expert advice by granting their Innovators award to consultants in this area.

Sick and injured animals must be promptly identified and a course of action initiated. Regular, normally daily, inspection of every animal should be standard practice on all animal farms. The more intensive the situation, as is typical on pig farms, the more frequent inspection should be. A decision tree should be established to determine the appropriate course of action. Suffering due to sickness or injury that can be alleviated by treatment should be attended to promptly. If suffering cannot be alleviated, or once recovered the animal is unfit for human consumption, or if transporting to a slaughter plant would impose additional suffering, then the animal should be euthanized. Several of the 'FAC' groups and provincial pork producer organizations, including OFAC (Ontario Farm Animal Council) and Ontario Pork have developed guidelines for assessment, decision making, and on-farm euthanasia. Every pork producer should obtain copies of these and include them in their staff training and management protocols. Failure to, or delay in, euthanizing animals is a major and avoidable source of animal suffering on farms. All stockpersons should be trained to identify animals requiring euthanasia and be prepared to administer it promptly.

LONG TERM PLANNING

It is often said that good stockmanship is the key to animal welfare. Although I agree that stockmanship is critical, it is my opinion that this statement has been used to deflect valid

criticism of management systems and facilities. A good handler can greatly reduce the stress on a pig moving through a poorly designed loading ramp; but, a well-designed ramp is essential to trouble free handling. It is evident that packing plants realize that they will only achieve acceptable standards of animal welfare in their handling areas by providing well designed facilities and appropriate training to the staff that use them. Producers must realize that the same applies to their facilities. A new loadout may be costly to design and build, and so must be considered part of a long term plan for improving welfare on the farm. We should also recognize that although excellent designs exist for the high throughput facilities required in packing plants, less expensive facilities that accommodate fewer pigs are needed for farms. Such designs are not as readily available.

Space allowance represents an area of compromise on many farms. Although producers would generally concede that crowding to the point that growth rate is depressed reflects poor animal welfare, the practice remains common as it reduces the cost of production and additional space is often not readily available. The situation is compounded by the fact that preferred slaughter weights are increasing, and many farms produce more pigs than they were originally designed for. Producers need to realistically assess their space needs for nursery and finishing pigs and plan for additional space or reduced animal throughput.

Perhaps the most controversial welfare issue in North American pig production is that of gestation housing for sows. In recent presentations I have identified what I believe to be the main welfare criteria for these animals. These are: freedom of movement; freedom from aggression; control over individual feed intake; environmental enrichment; and, sufficient postural space for comfort and safety. Perhaps the issue of gestation housing best reflects my earlier comments on the importance of management system as well as stockmanship. If freedom of movement is seen as the most important contributor to sow welfare, then stall housing, regardless of the skill of the stockperson, is unacceptable. Similarly, if protection from aggression is critical to good welfare, then all group housing systems would be unacceptable regardless of the care given. In this presentation, I will defer to the Code of Practice (AAFC, 1993), which states “we recommend that producers give serious consideration to alternatives or modifications to the current dry sow stall systems when renovating, expanding, or building.” Long term planning, by both individual producers and the industry as a whole, is required to address this welfare issue.

CONCLUSIONS

Ensuring a high standard of animal welfare on a farm requires a firm resolve on the part of management that is communicated to the stockpersons through training and supervision, and is reflected in facility design and repair. A process of both internal and external assessment is necessary to identify shortcomings and measure progress. Several critical welfare concerns need continuous attention, including handling, identification and treatment of sick and injured animals, and timely euthanasia. Producers should include consideration of handling facilities, increased space requirements, and alternative gestation housing in their long range plans.

LITERATURE CITED

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