

Cross Border Livestock Health II Proceedings
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Speakers:

Dr. Jennifer Walker, Dean Foods

Dr. Geoff Urton, BC SPCA

Assessing Welfare: Audits, What Works and What Doesn't

Dr. Jennifer Walker began her presentation by reminding the crowd that when it comes to assessing anything it is important to remember that what works is a matter of perspective. She noted that relationships and expectations have been changing over time as society has become more aware of mistreatment of animals. In these changing times less than 10% of people's income is being spent on food and the consumers are becoming more geographically removed from the farmers. The problem with this new reality is that animals have been removed from the food we eat and have simultaneously been evaluated, the result of which farming as a business has been vilified.

Now science is not going to have the answers to all the questions. It is no longer a question of what can we do but rather what should we do? The new emerging questions deal with social values and industry is going to have to accept that there are some practices that society will simply not support. Consumers do not like abuse, neglect or the inhumane treatment animals. Customers don't like the same things in addition to consumer complaints, don't want their name dragged through the mud. There are many competing priorities, approaches and biases that need to be balanced.

In the delicate act of balancing purpose and prevention, protecting the brand comes down to trust. A common message heard from agriculture is "of course I treat my animals well, otherwise they wouldn't produce," but consumers take this in a very negative way. Consumers want to hear that the animals are taken well taken care of because they deserve it. Big business cannot be seen as self serving and compliant because then they could lose their professional standing. The ability to maintain social license is dependent on the ability to maintain the trust of today's consumer. Industry needs to understand that there are significant consequences to losing trust and that those consequences not limited to just the bad actor.

It is critical to recognize the different motivations for audits. Many of the efforts to build and impose audits are made by customers because of the regulatory void in industry. There are multiple audits in the United States and a large amount of confusion surrounding different systems. Audits should be a system of risk mitigation, identifying high risks and removing them from the supply chain. There is a current focus on visually oriented issues that tend to oversimplify the actual reality. This does not improve animal welfare and leads to cherry picking the good farms. Audits are currently being used to create a buffer between consumers and farms and actually don't get very deep into how performance is monitored. Only establishing expectations does not work; it just provides an opportunity to throw some one under the bus.

Most consumer facing approaches are aimed at creating advantages or niches. Labels are used to communicate standards to consumers. Compliance with these labels varies. The authorities that set the standards vary as well and the failure of these systems to improve animal welfare is systematic. Farms should not be paying for their own audits. Improving animal welfare requires continuing monitoring on an ongoing basis as well as the requirement of high expectations, using well-managed farms as the goal post. The only audit to successfully achieve this are the pork and beef slaughterhouses' AMI Slaughterhouse Standards, who have internal and third party audits as well as making sure that plans are acted on. This approach has proven to work where all others have failed to improve animal welfare. Industry needs to be held accountable to a single standard with training, certification of third party auditors, and the development of chains of evidence.

We need to mind the gap between expectation and reality, communicating that we are doing the best practices but may not have reached the goals yet. Every one needs to start communicating clearly and less aspirationally. If a mistake is made, it is critical to own up to it. In the end, Dr. James said she doesn't want to hear or see excuses. The entire industry needs to be better than that and needs to stop making every one else a scapegoat. Explanation and communication is necessary because not everything is connected to agriculture and not every one is educated. It is perfectly ok for people to have expectation without understanding. Agriculture needs to be committed, through transparency and accountability, on not settling for a minimum standard and acknowledge.

A Canadian Approach to Farm Animal Welfare Policy

Dr. Geoff Urton began his presentation by acknowledging that there would be many similarities to the Dr. James' presentation then continued on to confirming that undercover activist videos are a new reality. He then continued by stating that people express a lot of surprise at seeing the SPCA at agriculture conferences and when learning of their farm animal role. One of the SPCA's key mandates is to conduct animal cruelty law enforcement work.

The BC SPCA is well positioned to respond, with lots of intellectual professional in the office. Research conducted by Farm and Food Care Ontario shows that Canadians have a positive impression of farming practices, even if they have no idea what actually happens on farms. This represents that animal agriculture has a social license. The fact that people don't know what goes on in farms is a huge risk due to the power of public perception. With undercover investigations in media becoming a more prevalent occurrence there will be a huge drive of increased public awareness of poor animal welfare practices and raises the question of whether industry is organization disruption ready? In the middle of a crisis is not the time to try to develop the relationships necessary to deal with the situations with any degree of trust.

A question that is frequently asked is how are farm animals are protected in Canada? The general public has a low awareness of animal cruelty laws. The Criminal Code does not protect against willful cruelty. British Columbia's Prevention of Cruelty to Animal Act (PCA Act) is in place to protect animals in distress. There is a defense provision provided based around the, "reasonable and generally accepted practices of animal management." These practices have not been defined in law and the public does not understand how this varies across sectors. Canada's Codes of Practice are used for educating individuals and are intended to set out an understanding of farm practices.

The National Farm Animal Care Council has really developed into a lead organization in facilitating the collaborative partnership between diverse groups of stakeholders. Through committees, new key features were added to the codes to really strengthen them. The codes are more transparent and more robust to public criticisms through the addition of these new features. Canada's Codes of Practice are clearly delineated document that has very clear requirements and is already a regulatory requirement. Industry and other stakeholders still have the opportunity to be clear about issues and can recommend additional practices. The Canadian guidelines go well above international IOE standards.

An incredible amount of new codes have been published and many more are still in progress. The relationships built around these have really improved trust so that when crises come up have the relationships that are required to deal with it together are already in place. One of the most important highlights of these codes is that they allow for flexibility. In order to secure confidence for the new codes mechanisms are required to show enforcement or else they will lose public and consumer confidence. The cycle for code development is very process oriented.

When it comes to incorporating these codes and standards, regulations is the most invasive way to handle it. The codes are prescribed as a minimum of generally accepted practices. Overall, the take homes are that this kind of dialogue yields really robust results but there is a little bit of an emergency in making sure that these codes are verified in farms. This is a call to action for industry.

Question from Janice with the University of Calgary: How come do we still brand? She understands that there is precedence. What about state sponsored branding? Really? In this day and age do we need to have our governments doing state sponsored government cruelty?

Dr. Urton: The public doesn't believe it is acceptable but the next question is what are the alternatives. Alternatives are out there but they are not permanent enough to work. The wording around it is loose, "branding when necessary," when it is required, for exports for instances. We can't address every issue all at once. The beef industry is still trying to deal with pain requirements. SPCA is disappointed by it, but can only change things one thing at a time. Maybe easier to address export requirements?

Unidentified Speaker: Do we have significant disruption management to deal with one of those videos showing up?

Dr. James: No, but we can't throw the baby out with the bathwater. It is not a perfect code. We can't get it all done at once; have to go in baby steps. It is great that industry is willing to ask what they are going to do about it and engaging to act at the local level. Is it more important to be right or relevant? Have to accept that we are not going to have it perfect, going to have to realize that edges are going to have to be softened. An alternative to the early question, distinguish between branding for exporting and branding for personnel ownership. There is a current need for branding and haven't we haven't seen any viable alternatives.

Comment: Being that Washington State is a restricted feedlot area and that the brand is a state requirement, maybe the item should be to get Washington to restrict.

Question: Geoff, what is your view on banning some of the activist groups from releasing videos to media. Do we need that big public outcry?

Dr. Urton: That is a great question. The whole trend has run its course in the US. Recent attempts have not gone through because it doesn't make sense to legislators to prevent criminal activities from being proposed. Other law enforcements has come out and said that this is not good precedence. It would probably foster more distrust of industry. What do you have to hide is the question that will be asked. Best to just try to neutralize the events on farms. I think the auditing will help, maybe shift the culture. If it were my sector I would go to my board and free money up for auditors on every farm.

Dr. James: These are generally not perceived well by the public. The fact is that if it weren't for some of those videos the treatment of animals would be the same as it was thirty years ago. It took that to get the auditing process started. The videos are ugly but they are an opportunity. The reason these videos kill us is because we have no response. Once industry has standards and compliance then it is possible to have

a conversation. It is not until we have a program with some teeth that we can have that conversation. Having no answer makes us look really bad. Not having a plan is stupefying, so customers give you one. I hate the videos but at the same time they are what they are.

Then there was a general comment on Ag Gag legislation and the need to report abuse if it continues for more than 24 hours.

Dr. James: I don't like those either. Do you have to report or have an opportunity to teach and intervene? Does that mean I have to report everything? It puts lots of people in a terrible position. No matter how long it took to come up with video is irrelevant. Need to address fact that they got the video.

Question from Larry Delver with Alberta Beef Producers: Should the industry create their own video? Also brought up research by John Thompson about cortisol level in branding and how the levels jump when the animal is constrained and don't really change during the rest of the activity. The stress is based upon being bound. Probably need a little more research to find out precisely where the problems are. Is constraining animals for significant period of time is the problem?

Dr. James: Cortisol is not really the best indicator. Looking at how long that pain is extended, post-procedural pain and the use some sort of pain mitigating steps? Shows that you care, which is a critical part of conversations. If we can show that we are not indifferent that is the current best we can do. Nothing is going to mitigate the procedural pain.

Question from Betty Althouse, Chief Veterinary Officer for Saskatchewan: How can we be assured that those programs are true improvements in animal welfare? I worry when hearing the wording around them.

Dr. James: Based on existing codes of practice, it really comes down to the auditing. The question is how do we role this out in a way that is consistent across Canada. It has to be scalable. There also needs to be consequences for non-compliance, without that these programs have no teeth and no credit. There would be opportunities to come into compliance, but might be a certain point were a producer has demonstrated not able to come into compliance or unable to and that is where the consequences come in. For the states it is a little but different. Still need a single system though that has some key elements of compliance. Every farmer will have the basic opportunity to succeed. Has to be some responsibility and documentation beyond the farm. Going to have to be transparent and use benchmarking. Using the national data to drive industry. Want to invest efforts who folks who need it most. Second and third party assessments. Have to adapt what the meat industry has done. It is build a system that can track performance.

Question: You talked about producers not paying for audits. Who do you propose?

Dr. James: The audits could be paid for by farm check off. We would say the dean would be responsible for second party audits; maybe check off program could fund maybe part of third party as well. It might be the milk buyer, I don't know.

Question from Jamie Curran from Alberta Agriculture: From a policy perspective, should pets and agriculture animals be treated differently?

Dr. Urton: I'd argue that from a policy perspective they are not. No explicit laws anywhere to suggest this. All policy is based on the concept of causing distress. Distinctions come in with "general practice". It is up to industry and stakeholders to define those rules. It has sort have been a micro chasm of public debate, but they worked it out and we should have these standards and codes in place for every sort of animals. Public expectations are increasing and the expectation is for farm animals to be treated more like pets, but not in a reasonable way. The unreasonable expectations are often around housing. We have science to show what these animals actually need. Equal consideration does not mean equal treatment.

Comment from Lyn Anglin with Agriculture Canada: Want to share a few observations from the international perspective. The first is that consumers in third markets perceive that whatever is happening in one country is happening in another. Number two, I would like to emphasis how good it would be to go to other countries and brag about these practices. There is an opportunity to do that in emerging markets. The last thing, if we don't have a way to demonstrate that we have a way to show that we are making positive efforts, other countries will impose their restrictions upon us. It makes sense to invest in these things from an international perspective.

Comment: You were talking about public perspective and now I want to talk about industry perspective. There needs to be a change in the industry perspective of the SPCA. There needs to be an image change for the SPCA so they are not scared every time they see you coming.

Dr. Urton: The SPCA is accountable to many different organizations and bodies for our enforcement work. One thing that we need to do more of is collaborating on partnering. Can't be an expert in everything. Peer advisors from BC Cattleman's Association have been partnering on investigation so that there is a better understanding of generally acceptable practices. There are a lot of misconceptions out there. The SPCA is accountable under law and pro animal agricultural association. It concerns me when I hear perceptions that.

Action Items

No action items were decided upon. Instead, participant will think about action items tonight and present them at the final part of the session.