

Animal Welfare Audits

Animal welfare audit, verification program or animal care assessment tool

— regardless of the label, the goal is to measure animal welfare at some point in the production system, providing assurances that food animals are humanely treated.

In Europe the focus is on finding better indices of animal welfare. A Vienna conference in September 2005, *Assessment of Animal Welfare at Farm and Group Level*, reviewed the state of science in assessing animal welfare.

Conference participant, Anne Malleau of Whole Foods Market Animal Compassion Foundation, says, “Europe is in a state of flux. They know where they want to go regarding animal care assessment, but are having trouble deciding how to get there.” The debate revolves around animal versus resource or management-based criteria — which are better indicators of animal welfare?

The European project, **Welfare Quality (WQ)**, aims to develop European on-farm assessment standards. The focus is on animal-based measures — assessing the state of the animals themselves, as opposed to the environment or management systems.

Dr. David Fraser, a University of British Columbia professor who also sits on the WQ project’s Scientific Board, says, “animal-based measures work well for scoring health and functioning aspects of welfare, but how do we measure things like short-term pain?” In the instance of painful procedures an audit would need to incorporate criteria such as the use of analgesics or other mitigating procedures. “We must recognize the variety of issues in animal welfare,” says Dr. Fraser.

Anne Malleau agrees. “Whole Foods is looking at developing their own assessment program using a combination of animal, management and design criteria. A one-size-fits-all assessment tool is not going to work.”

Anne Marie de Passillé, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada researcher, says, “Animal-based measures of welfare will catch most problems. Plus, **by using animal-based measures, we are sure to get increased productivity. A big step to having producers use audits is to show the rewards.**”



Dr. Grandin conducting an Alberta meat plant audit

Dr. de Passillé believes that other animal welfare issues can be addressed through **training courses**. Courses on animal handling, pain assessment, etc. build awareness of issues that are not easily incorporated into a checklist.

In Europe, the issue with audits/assessments is their effectiveness at measuring welfare. Anne Malleau says on-farm programs are widely used, but “there is little consensus on how good they are at assessing and providing feedback on systems and farms.” Another issue is how to compare one program to another.

In Canada, animal welfare audits have

been occurring at federally inspected processing plants for years and on-farm animal care assessment tools are being developed by commodity groups and niche markets. Dr. de Passillé believes that these tools are worthwhile. “Just having a checklist makes you do things better.”

Dr. Bill Ballantyne, Director Technical Services, Maple Leaf Pork told attendees of the 2006 Banff Pork seminar that in Canada animal welfare audits of pork processors began in 2001. “The audits were characterized by an emphasis on

quantifiable and easily observable outcomes.” This has led to many improvements. “Animal welfare receives resources for training, audits have prompted changes at facilities (that also normally lead to improved meat quality), and generally employees feel better about what we do. We have come a long way,” says Dr. Ballantyne.

However, in **North America** there is no coordination of efforts when it comes to verification programs. “No one is coming together to assess what

is the right way to do assessments,” says Dr. de Passillé. “Part of the problem is that things are fragmented, each producer group is doing their own thing. We have other groups developing animal welfare standards too, like the BC SPCA and the organic industry.”

Dr. de Passillé believes that North America needs to start developing its own animal care assessment strategy. **“It’s not that Europe is better, it’s that we need to take some leadership and develop something of our own.** We need to come together and develop common goals — why can’t we be doing this?” ■