

Caring For Cows

*Ontario Dairy Farmers ask how they're doing on Animal Welfare
by Jeffrey Rau*

Before the recent discovery of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in Canada, the dairy industry was in the enviable position of attracting very little attention with respect to animal welfare concerns relative to the swine and poultry industries. Now with BSE, the dairy industry is attracting more attention, and production and management practices are coming under increasing public scrutiny based on environmental, food safety, and animal welfare grounds. When it comes to animal welfare, experiences in other food animal industries tell us that consumers are concerned with housing and management practices that cause pain and suffering. Housing practices that restrict the free movement of animals, as well as procedures that involve pain, especially those that are viewed as unnecessary, were the subject of conversation at a recent meeting of dairy producers in Ontario.

I was invited to speak on behalf of CanFACT to a group of 100 dairy farmers in Oxford County, Ontario about animal welfare. The farmers refer to themselves as a “study group”, and it was obvious why. The meeting was all about information sharing and learning for the benefit of individual farmers, their cows, and the dairy industry. Also speaking at the meeting were Carl Loewith, an owner of Summitholm Farms, and master breeder in 2002, who milks 300 cows on a conventional dairy operation; and Karl Schibli, an organic farmer out of Waterford, who milks 40 certified organic Brown Swiss cows on 400 acres. Each speaker presented what they feel are aspects of cow management and housing that can use immediate improvement, as well as some perspective on challenges that lie ahead for the dairy industry.

Some animal welfare issues identified at the meeting that are of concern to the dairy industry are the use of tie stall management; pain associated with invasive procedures such as dehorning; and the transportation of ‘downers’ or non-ambulatory cows. One major challenge that all of the livestock industries face is responding to consumer demands in ways that are economically feasible to farmers. It was agreed that a realistic starting point toward this end is to find so-called “win-win” situations in which farmers can achieve appreciable increases in both animal welfare, and productivity, or, at the very least achieve improved welfare at very little or no additional cost.

It is fair to suggest that consumers find the confinement aspect of tie-stall housing offensive. But with 3-4% of dairy producers leaving the industry on an annual basis, the issue of tie-stall management appears to be working its way out of the industry with more new barns going the way of free-stall housing. It should be noted however, that although free-stall housing may be aesthetically more appealing for most consumers and farmers, it may bring with it a unique set of welfare challenges.

Due to the risk of injury to cows and farm workers, dehorning is a necessary practice. But, it is only necessary for cows that have horns! The concerns of pain and suffering that surround dehorning can be eliminated by selectively breeding for cows without horns. It is possible that this could be accomplished over a period of time by breeding the polled gene into existing dairy herds. In the meantime, the dairy industry, and the veterinarians who provide direction have an opportunity to alleviate the pain

associated with dehorning by developing and implementing pain management protocols that utilize anesthetic and analgesic drugs.

Perhaps the biggest and most difficult welfare issue facing the dairy industry today is the management and transportation of downer cows. In light of the recent border closure due to BSE, the value of cull cows has been dramatically reduced, which creates less incentive for farmers to ship animals that should have been euthanized on-farm for humane reasons. While the Oxford County dairy group agrees that on-farm euthanasia is the only humane way of dealing with downer cows, the issue of dead stock disposal remains unsolved. Perhaps the most effective method of dealing with the downer cow issue is preventions. There is no doubt that downer cows will always be a problem, but producers may be able to reduce the incidence of downer cows through increased diligence with respect to cow comfort, disease prevention, and a proactive approach to identifying cull cows early. Anything that can be done to improve the longevity and soundness of dairy cows will be a worthwhile investment toward this end, and may have economic benefits for producers. Animal scientists, veterinarians, and farmers need to continue to identify ways in which they can improve herd genetics, housing and stockmanship that will minimize the incidence of downer cows and maintain an overall profitable herd. Furthermore, the Oxford County dairy producers suggest that the federal and provincial governments must act as partners in finding a long term solution through the development of an infrastructure that can deal effectively with the cull cow and dead stock disposal issues.

The proactive approach to animal welfare within the dairy industry, as demonstrated by the Oxford County dairy group, is to be commended. With support from the animal science, veterinary and government sectors, they have an opportunity to be leaders in addressing and anticipating animal welfare concerns on their farms and within their industry.

About The Author

Jeff Rau is currently a second year student at the Ontario Veterinary College. Prior to entering the OVC, Jeffrey obtained a Masters Degree from the University of Guelph. After graduation, he was appointed by the Humane Society of the United States. After serving in Washington for two years, he returned to Canada and successfully applied to study veterinary medicine at the OVC. Always committed to the welfare of animals, particularly farm animals, Jeffrey serves as a Director of the Canadian Farm Animal Care Trust. He has made an invaluable contribution to that organization.