

Vogel Breaks Down Animal Welfare for Beef Producers

When setting standards for animal welfare on a livestock operation, the key is consistency.

by Peggy Coffeen

In order to maintain consumer trust, we must consistently do the right thing,” Kurt Vogel, from the University of Wisconsin–River Falls (UWRF), told cattle producers at an early February Wisconsin Cattlemen’s Association annual meeting. However, the challenge of animal welfare lies in determining what exactly the right thing is and how people working with cattle can understand and achieve that in a way that makes their operations more profitable and productive.

According to Vogel, there are three players in the game of animal welfare: the scientist, the auditor and the producer. Each of these players looks at the game of animal welfare through different eyes, but with the same end result in mind of reducing stress points that cause negative results or behaviors.

“The scientist is focused on finding measurable variables,” Vogel said. They are looking to quantify results based on actual data. Scientists look at glands and hormones that react to both positive and negative stressors and take measurements of hormone and blood metabolite levels before and after stress is applied. The reaction to stress may result in increases in heart rate, metabolic rate and blood glucose levels. On the other hand, the digestive tract may slow down as a result of stress. As cattle producers already know, said Vogel, when cattle are stressed they don’t gain as well.

“The auditor’s job is to come on a facility for a day and measure a few factors,” Vogel said. The job of the auditor differs from the scientist in that the auditor makes inferences based on a combination of statistics and perceptions. One of the first things an auditor looks at is the number of times cattle fall during handling. Falling rates could be the result of weak areas in the facilities, such as slippery walkways, or it could be caused by handlers trying to move cattle too aggressively. Other factors an auditor looks at include electric prod usage and broken tails, which both can be numerically measured and held to a set standard for comparison.

Ideally, an auditor would be an unbiased person who comes to the operation. Organizations like

the American Humane Society have developed their own farm auditing programs. The American Humane Certified program has been gaining momentum, particularly in niche markets, Vogel said. At the least, a self-audit can be beneficial for a livestock operation.

“The producer needs to assess animal welfare effectively, but has limited time and resources,” Vogel said. That is why a basic self-assessment can be beneficial in identifying strengths and weaknesses on the operation, and it can be as simple as starting with current farm records. “If you are doing the right things for the animals, you should be getting decent production,” Vogel said.

He recommended looking at the herd cull rate, then looking deeper into the reasons for culling. Explore whether culling was voluntary or involuntary, then injury- or disease-related. Identifying trends may help producers determine which areas to prioritize when making improvements in facilities, management or handling.

Other records that can indicate animal welfare are the grade and yield reports. Take note of where carcasses were marked for bruising. “Bruising at the packing plant can oftentimes be tracked back to the auction barn and the farm,” Vogel said. He encouraged producers to reference the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program’s guidebook, *Cattle Industry Guidelines for the Care and Handling of Cattle*.

The next step in a self-audit is to assess facilities and the animals themselves. Determine whether or not the animals have adequate access to feed and water and space to move. Also, inspect pens and facilities for proper maintenance and cleanliness. When looking at the cows, Vogel optimizes for a body condition score (BCS) of 4 or greater. If there are cows scoring 1 or 2, producers should question whether or not they should keep those animals in the herd.

Producers should also evaluate their protocol for down cows.

“How are you moving them?” he asked. “If you don’t have the proper equipment to move them, then you must have a plan to

euthanize them.” He went on to say that proper euthanization is one of the biggest challenges on farms. Workers should be trained in how to humanely euthanize an animal, or they should be educated on who they can call on to do so if they are not capable themselves.

Cattle handling should also be examined during the self-audit. Vogel noted that by animal welfare standards, the acceptable level for using an electric prod is not greater than 10%. Falling incidents should be less

than 2%, and no more than 25% of the herd should be jumping or running while being handled. “If your handling exceeds these values, figure out why and take corrective action,” Vogel said, “If more than 25% are jumping out of the chute, you need to focus on the experience that the animal had in it, and how much harder it will be to get that animal to go into the chute again.”

When setting standards for animal welfare on a livestock operation, the key is consistency. “It’s not a sometimes thing, it is an all-the-time thing,” Vogel said. He recommends setting clear rules and expectations for proper cattle handling. Take time not only to educate new cattle handlers on how cattle should be treated, but also retrain existing employees regularly. Perhaps most impactful in teaching others is for producers themselves to demonstrate care and concern over their animals’ well-being. “Create a culture of concern for the welfare of animals under your care,” he said. “There is no debate over concern that the well-being of animals trickles down from the top, down to employees and young people on the operation.”

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