

Producers use science and common sense to write care and handling guidelines for beef cattle.

Story & photos by *Stephanie Veldman*

Beef producers take pride in providing proper care and protection for the cattle they raise. Sound animal husbandry practices have been developed and implemented through decades of research and hands-on experience. Producers adapt these practices to best fit the region and environment in which the cattle are raised.

A decade ago, a general set of guidelines was developed to help guide cattlemen and offer suggestions on proper care and handling of cattle. These guidelines were modified in 1997 to include new research and to refine the suggested production practices. The charge of developing these guidelines fell to the Animal Care Subcommittee of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Cattle Health and Well Being Committee. The NCBA Executive Committee adopted the most current set of guidelines in January 2003.

"The original purpose was to basically establish an industry standard for animal care and handling," says Mark Spire, former chairman of the subcommittee and professor at Kansas State University (K-State) College of Veterinary Medicine. "We realized we had a very diverse group within NCBA — we go from desert lands to tropical climates, from the Rocky Mountains to the Plains — and we wanted to build [the standard guidelines] to where they weren't restrictive."

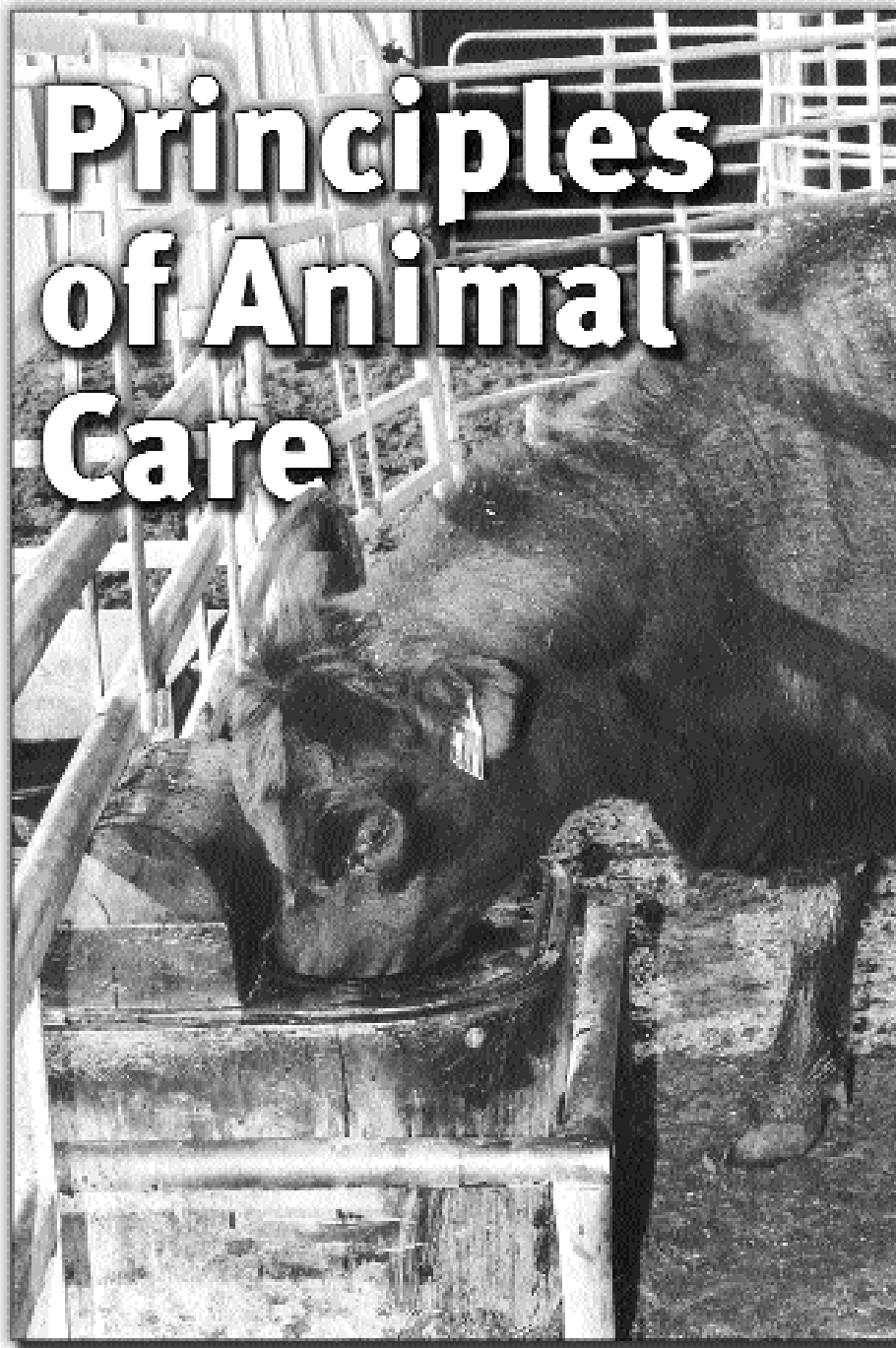
The guidelines provide general rules of thumb to use as indicators of the performance of cattle-handling systems and the employees managing them. The guidelines encourage periodic evaluation of cattle care and handling practices, stating, "Management practices should be informally assessed every day to ensure that animal welfare is not compromised."

Request for guidelines

In late 2001 the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and the National Council of Chain Restaurants (NCCR) announced they were going to develop animal care guidelines at the request of their members.

According to Gary Weber, NCBA executive director of regulatory affairs, a number of activist groups had begun proposing boycotts and demonstrations that would affect quick-service restaurants and grocery stores.

Initially, FMI and NCCR were going to



develop animal care guidelines themselves.

"After a number of meetings, we encouraged them to understand that we had for years been working on guidelines in various forms," Weber says. It was important that the NCBA and other species groups be involved with writing the guidelines to make sure they were achievable for producers, based on science and done in a cooperative manner between all parties involved, he adds.

Janice Swanson, a K-State animal scientist who specializes in animal welfare issues, says it is important for producers to understand

that these guidelines were written by producers for producers.

"There has been a misconception that the FMI/NCCR animal welfare advisory council is actually writing the guidelines, and we are not," she says. "What we look for is the integrity and soundness of those guidelines, and where we see deficits or where we see gaps, we engage in a process of asking the groups to address those gaps."

Weber says that when FMI and NCCR received the first draft of the guidelines, they recommended some minor changes. "Overall

► **Above:** Animal care guidelines are meant to establish an industry standard for animal care and handling, says Mark Spire, K-State professor. "We realized we had a very diverse group within the NCBA ... and we wanted to build [the standard guidelines] to where they weren't restrictive," he adds.

they were very supportive of the components we were addressing," he says.

Focus on producers

Gary Cowman, NCBA executive director of research and technical services, says that the most important thing when developing the guidelines was to make sure they were workable for producers.

"As we develop these, we have to develop something that complies with our industry. We have to get producer buy-in, and we have to draft these so they satisfy the concerns of the retailers," Cowman says. "But at the same time, we can't develop something our producers can't deliver."

The guidelines incorporate all aspects of care and handling of beef cattle, including nutritional needs, employee training and education, health care practices and disease prevention, cattle handling practices, downer cattle, and heat stress. They also include all types of beef production, from cow-calf operations to stocker operations and feedlots.

Cowman says they had to compromise with FMI on some of the major issues, like the use of hot-iron brands. "We can have some guidelines like to use a minimum-size branding iron and proper restraint of the animal — those types of things that surround the practice. But we can't say 'no more hot-iron branding,'" he adds.

Spire says that a September 2002 NCBA Cattle Care Working Group meeting in Kansas City, Mo., brought in representatives from several groups to review the guidelines. Cowman adds that all sectors of the industry and different regions of the country were represented at the meeting to make sure the guidelines would work in all areas.

"We had a number of organizations that came in and basically spent a day going line by line revising the guidelines," Spire says. Bob Smith, a veterinarian and cattle producer from Stillwater, Okla., chaired the working group.

The NCBA also had scientists working with them on their advisory review board. Two of the scientists — Swanson and Temple Grandin, a livestock-handling specialist at Colorado State University (CSU) — were present early in the process to help explain what guidelines are and what they are meant to do. They also explained how to develop a good set of guidelines.

Good guidelines are scientifically based and practical, Swanson says, adding that in setting recommendations, the subcommittee took time to look at the scientific literature to find out what the best practices for those animals should be.



► The guidelines incorporate all aspects of the care and handling of beef cattle, including proper facility design and proper ways to move cattle through the facility.

"The second half of that is the practicality," Swanson says, "meaning that we can find out what the scientific baseline is, but we have a whole lot of other things to consider, because no one set of production practices may fit all situations."

Swanson says she hopes producers will use the guidelines in the spirit in which they were meant to be used. "They are meant to give guidance to cattle producers, feeders and processors with regard to what is considered to be good technique with regard to handling animals, processing animals, and handling animals when they are down or nonambulatory," she says.

Implementing guidelines

Weber says the next step for the NCBA is to distribute copies of the guidelines for the care and handling of beef cattle to state beef quality assurance (BQA) coordinators and state affiliates. "We are encouraging them to consider ways of incorporating this into their beef quality assurance initiatives in their states," he adds.

Cowman says the NCBA is planning to incorporate points from the guidelines in its national BQA educational program.

"We think the way to deliver these out to the industry is through our quality assurance

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—Janice Swanson

programs," Cowman adds. "We are in the process of drafting some kind of teaching module where this can be a part of the training."

Weber adds that an example of a possible training tool would be a video to illustrate proper facility design and proper ways to move cattle through the facility.

Weber says the NCBA also has encouraged FMI to use the guidelines as an educational tool instead of an auditing tool.

"We are encouraging [FMI and NCCR] to understand that first and foremost we have to initiate our educational program on a national basis, and we want to see how the guidelines are accepted and how they are worked for people," Weber says.

Though NCBA is discouraging FMI and NCCR from using the guidelines to develop an audit system, Swanson says audits are already occurring within other species groups, like poultry and swine, through FMI and NCCR members who are instituting third-party audit programs.

These programs are being based on the guidelines from the respective producer groups. Once the guidelines have been accepted, an auditing document will be created based on those guidelines. The third-party audit would take place at the request of individual retailers.

Currently, a few retailers have audit programs set up for the swine, egg and poultry industries. "It will take some time to get to the beef industry," Swanson says. "It is a little more complex coming into the beef industry than the swine, egg or broiler industries. They are fairly streamlined. The cattle industry's primary interface is at the processor's door, so managing the leap from processor to feedlot to cow-calf or stocker will take some time."

Currently, Cowman says the NCBA is developing literature for an educational program that highlights the guidelines. "We want to put it into a more user-friendly format for producers," Cowman says, noting that the current guidelines are in a 17-page document. "I can't see most producers reading past page two in the current format."

The NCBA is in the process of making an interactive mini CD that includes the animal care guidelines, interviews with producers and explanations as to why it is important for producers to be aware of the animal care guidelines.

To obtain a copy of the guidelines as approved by the NCBA Executive Committee, call Cowman at (303) 850-3375, or e-mail him at glcowman@beefchat.com.

