



Vet Call

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Weighing the importance of animal welfare

The issue of animal welfare is of growing importance to beef producers due to growing interest among consumers.

Cause for concern

Animal welfare is becoming a meat quality issue because some retailers want a “brand” that portrays a caring image for animals. Suppliers who support that brand image provide meat with more value and quality than suppliers who do not strengthen that image for the retailer.

I have read a number of well-written articles and textbooks on the subject of animal welfare, and I want to share some of the experts’ insights with you. Animal welfare may be defined as a concern for animal suffering and for animal satisfaction. Neither suffering nor satisfaction can be measured directly, making scientific evaluation difficult, but not impossible.

An animal scientist from New Zealand points out that there are three reasons that livestock producers should be concerned about animal welfare. First, animal caretakers should inherently respect animals. Second, poor welfare can lead to poor product quality. Third, market share can be lost for products that acquire a poor welfare image.

Defining animal welfare

In some countries, five “freedoms” have been adopted to bring into law goals and expectations for animal care. The five freedoms for animals are based on human perceptions of what animals need and are usually defined as:

- freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition;
- provision of appropriate comfort and shelter;
- prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment of injury, disease or parasite infestation;
- freedom from distress; and
- the ability to display normal patterns of behavior.

Livestock producers generally agree that meeting these goals is desirable for their operations. Differences in opinion arise when people discuss what is specifically needed to meet these goals. For instance, how long without access to feed or water does it take before animals are no longer free from thirst or hunger? What constitutes appropriate shelter?

As a veterinarian, I recognize that suffering from disease is one of the most common and pronounced animal welfare problems. However, this form of suffering receives little public discussion, probably because animal health is almost uniformly desired, and there is little debate about the benefits of improved animal health.

In contrast, discussions about freedom from distress and the ability to display normal patterns of behavior often spill into public debate.

It is difficult to imagine any animal (or human) that is completely free from distress. In fact, some periods of distress are necessary for protection from danger and disease. Determining a uniformly acceptable definition of freedom from distress is proving to be difficult.

Some of the difficulty involves measuring distress in animals that respond to the same stimuli differently, or to a different degree, than humans, other species or even individuals of the same species. More difficulty arises from alternate views on acceptable levels and duration of distress.

The baseline that people use to determine normal behavior patterns can vary. Some base normal behavior on the closest wild relative of the domestic species; others base comparisons to the domestic species in a certain type of housing. Identifying and quantifying deviations from baseline behavior that indicate the presence of animal suffering or lack of satisfaction is difficult to differentiate from deviations from baseline behavior that do not indicate a decrease in animal welfare.

Despite the difficulties, science is being asked to address measurement and interpretation of animal behavior, and what is reported will almost certainly affect livestock production.

Putting management practices to the test

Many farms, ranches and feedlots are implementing methods to evaluate animal behavior and comfort. These evaluations include how often electric prods are used when moving cattle, how many cattle vocalize when placed in a squeeze chute, how many cattle run or stumble when exiting the squeeze chute, as well as other criteria.

Facilities are evaluated to determine if problems exist with unsure footing, sharp objects in walkways or crowding that can cause injuries. Also, the presence or duration of mud is evaluated. Comfort is evaluated by assessing the presence and adequacy of shelter from excessive heat or cold based on the local temperature and humidity. An important component of animal welfare evaluations is how sick or dying animals are cared for or euthanized.

All family members, employees and contractors, such as truckers and veterinarians, who come in contact with the herd are included in evaluations of the ranch or feedlot. If problems are found, personnel training and facility repair can correct most, if not all, animal welfare problems.

Producers may find themselves increasingly in positions to defend practices that have been used in animal production for decades or centuries. Questions may arise from some individuals that are antagonistic to any animal agriculture or some who oppose modern agriculture. Some people may be asking simply because they don’t have any knowledge of animals or agriculture.

Remember that Americans are now raised around television sets, and most are two or more generations removed from direct experience with animals or farms and ranches. As such, many consumers grow up seeing animals in movies and in animated films as thinking, sensitive creatures. Good animal welfare without good communication is likely to be as detrimental to the image of farmers and ranchers as poor animal welfare.

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