

An International Look

Panel takes a historical look at animal well-being and offers direction to the industry.

by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

Why is doing the right thing in regard to animal welfare so hard to do? It's because human behavior is hard to change, said the panel discussing animal welfare at the 2014 International Livestock Congress (ILC-USA 2014) in Denver, Colo., Jan. 14. The panel consisted of Karen Schwartzkopf-Genswein, beef welfare research scientist at the Lethbridge Research Centre of Agriculture Canada; Lily Edwards-Callaway, head of animal welfare at JBS USA; and Janice Swanson, director of animal welfare and professor at Michigan State University (MSU).

Turning point

As recently as the late 1980s and early 1990s, beef was a commodity-based market, and buyers put little emphasis on management practices. Now, the industry is more consumer-driven, and consumer and retail feedback is more readily available, Swanson said. In response to this new environment, the industry has proactively handled issues associated with meat quality such as injection-site lesions and bruising. Yet, it is hard to get an entire industry to change, especially between segments of the value chain, on animal-care practices. However, food retailers are becoming highly responsive to consumers and organizations that actively lobby for change in handling and management practices.

For example, a protest and subsequent court case involving McDonald's in England eventually had impact on the American beef industry, Swanson explained. Termed the "McLibel case," it was sparked by picketers outside McDonald's restaurants claiming that McDonald's was committing crimes against the environment, consumers, workers and animals. McDonald's launched a libel case against the group.

By and large, the company won the case, except on allegations of animal cruelty. More specifically, McDonald's lost on two points:

(1) Because it was not raising the animals, McDonald's said it was not responsible for any cruelty in the production chain. Swanson noted that the ruling essentially said, "Your purchasing and the downward pressure actually make you responsible for what happens at the production level."

(2) McDonald's argued that their producers used "recognized standard

management practices." She said of the ruling, "They may be recognized standard management practices, but that doesn't necessarily make them right."

This case likely affected corporate thought regarding issues of farm animal care. This also led to more effective strategies by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in engaging social justice that sparked development of corporate social-responsibility statements on animal welfare from many food retailers, Swanson said. These statements are meant to raise the bar and add accountability.

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Both science and emotion are engaged in discussions about animal welfare. Swanson added that emotion is a common thread that is in all humanity and is a shared trait in animals.

"Science, while it is an extension of our natural curiosity, is not something everyone can lock into," she said. "The beef industry needs to learn how to integrate science into emotional discussions."

Practical applications

When Schwartzkopf-Genswein decided to get her doctorate in animal welfare in the late 1980s, her boss at the time thought she was crazy. Animal welfare was thought to be based on emotion, a "soft science." Behavior and welfare are often lumped together, and behavior is the less controversial of the two. However, the perception of welfare is changing drastically.

Initially, when she pitched the idea of an animal-welfare position to Agriculture Canada, she said the industry was lukewarm on welfare research for fear of

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uncovering practices that might look bad. Her background with the feedlot industry proved that she wasn't "out to get them," but genuinely wanted to improve the welfare of animals, which can have positive market implications.

To highlight the industry's changing perceptions within the past 11 years, Schwartzkopf-Genswein said she has received more than \$7 million in research funding for beef welfare alone, most of the funding coming from the beef industry itself.

"The industry recognizes the value of looking at animal welfare and what that means to the sustainability of the industry, and recognizes that it is a market-driven thing. Doing the right thing makes the industry sustainable," she emphasized.

Current research is showing practical applications that add value to the operation, and there are new ways to measure the progress, she said. "As a research scientist, that's my job — to find ways to measure the welfare and behavior of animals."

Feedlots are regularly hiring animal-welfare consultants and conscious welfare practices are prevalent at the farm level, too. Audits are done at the packing plants.

Audits

Edwards-Callaway added that expectations on animal welfare haven't necessarily changed — people in the past probably made assumptions about animal welfare on farms but did not care to verify. Now more questions are being asked and customers are quite vocal about expectations. There is tremendous pressure on each segment of the industry, she added. The high prevalence of undercover videos tends to increase that pressure for producers, packers, retailers and customers.

"Retailers expect that packers are accountable for their supply chain — what are we (as packers) doing to assure animals are being properly cared for by our suppliers. One reason why audit programs have been developed is to do just that — to verify and subsequently provide confidence regarding

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how animals within the supply chain have been raised,” Edwards-Callaway noted.

However, in an example from the pork industry, many different audit programs have been developed by packers, producers and retailers, she shared. These differing standards, not wholly different but considered separate audit programs, place a large burden on producers to undergo multiple audits for market access. They also raise questions: Why are some standards different than others? Which are better?

The pork industry developed a task force of packers and producers to try to consolidate these multiple audit programs and create one robust audit platform, she explained.

“Audits and guidelines are not designed to penalize anyone, but they are established to drive and track improvement. An audit should not be designed so that everyone can pass; that will not drive change. We don’t want to operate to the lowest common denominator,” she added.

“Just because practices are ‘industry standards’ doesn’t mean that they are always



► From left, Karen Schwartzkopf-Genswein of the Lethbridge Research Centre of Agriculture Canada explained that her job as a research scientist is to find ways to measure the welfare and behavior of animals. MSU’s Janice Swanson emphasized that science needs to be made accessible by the beef industry by integrating it into emotional discussions. Lily Edwards-Callaway, head of animal welfare at JBS USA, explained that packer welfare audits are not meant to penalize those who do not meet the standards, but are meant to drive and track improvement.

right and, more importantly, that they can’t change. The ‘This is the way we have always done it’ way of thinking isn’t going to cut it anymore. The only constant is change. That’s the message, and we have to recognize that,” she concluded.

Editor’s Note: ILC–USA 2014, themed “The Cattle Industry at a Crossroads: How Do We Adapt to Change?” was hosted at the Renaissance Denver Hotel Jan. 14 in conjunction with the National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colo.

