

Animal Welfare Research Status

Beef industry notes welfare concerns, works to address.

by *Kasey Brown*, associate editor

Most wouldn't guess that the beef industry and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) have much in common. However, both have identified similar areas of beef cattle welfare that could be improved. Jason Ahola, associate professor in beef production systems at Colorado State University, shared research areas of animal welfare with attendees of the Range Beef Cow Symposium in November.

Ahola said he didn't intend to defend activists or question industry practices, but rather to educate industry participants on animal welfare-related issues associated with beef cattle and the science driving their evaluation. He shared an inward-focused Beef Checkoff-funded white paper that determined eight areas of welfare concerns that the beef industry can address.

1. Nutrition and growth. Issues include abrupt weaning, disease associated with high-concentrate diets, borderline body condition scores in winter, ionophores and hormonal implants.
2. Health issues of concern include

lameness and respiratory issues like bovine respiratory disease.

3. Painful procedures and no pain mitigation during castration, dehorning and branding.
4. Winter weather and resulting mud.
5. Heat load and access to shade and water to alleviate heat stress.
6. Social interaction causing disease and injury concerns increased through commingling of cattle at auction markets or high stocking rates.
7. Transport issues of space, feed and water withdrawal, distance traveled, rest intervals and unloading.
8. Slaughter, which he granted was not much of an issue anymore. It was probably the No. 1 issue about 30 years ago.

Surprisingly, HSUS identified five of these as their main complaints with the beef industry. Its top five issues were:

1. abrupt weaning;
2. calf transport;
3. castration;



► Jason Ahola educated industry participants on animal welfare-related issues associated with beef cattle and the science driving their evaluation. To listen to his presentation, go to <http://bit.ly/1VpDmfQ>.

4. dehorning; and
5. branding.

While these concerns are similar, HSUS calls castration, dehorning and branding "painful mutilations," which is certainly off-putting to consumers.

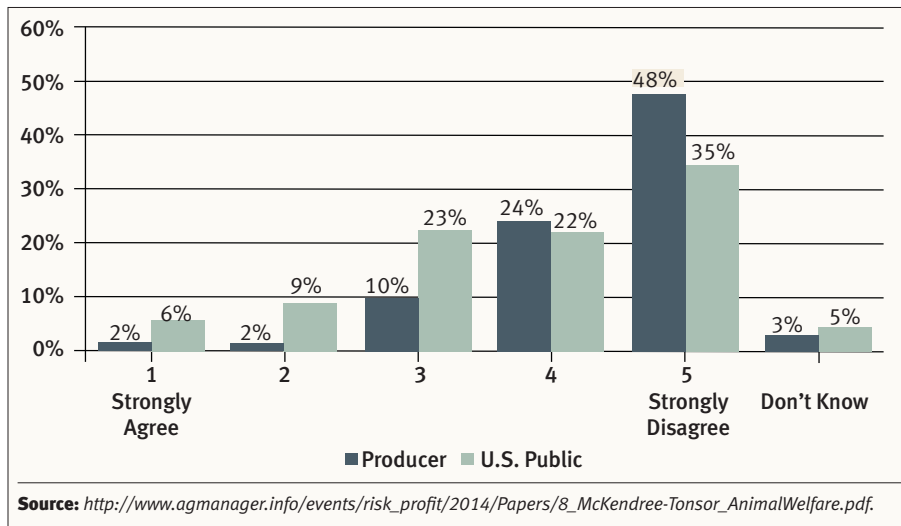
Table 1: Survey response to: Which of the following actions/practices are currently implemented on your operation?

Actions/ Practice	Frequency out of 686	Percent (think of as lower bound)
Handlers strive to move cattle at a comfortable pace, refrain from using loud noises, and use an electric prod on less than 10% of cattle. Sticks and flags can be used as extensions of the handler's arm but must not be used to hit cattle.	493	72%
Restrict use of antibiotics to only disease treatment.	454	66%
Develop a herd health plan with the help of a veterinarian.	398	58%
Castrate male calves either within the first three months of age or with pain control.	376	55%
Consistent training program for owner and employees focusing on principles of animal care and handling.	269	39%
Dehorn/disbud calves either before horn tissue adheres to skull or with pain control.	224	33%
Third-party verification that appropriate animal care and facilities are provided on farm.	64	9%
None.	10	1%

Source: http://www.agmanager.info/events/risk_profit/2014/Papers/8_McKendree-Tonsor_AnimalWelfare.pdf.



Fig. 1: Survey response to: Low beef prices are more important than the well-being of cattle



In regard to pain-management practices, the issue of pain mitigation is a tricky situation. Currently, Ahola explained, there are no drugs approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for pain relief in beef cattle.

There are few options at the moment for extra-label drug use through the *Animal Medicinal Drug Clarification Act* (AMDUCA). This act allows extra-label drug use to relieve suffering if it is administered under the supervision of a veterinarian, used only with

FDA-approved animal and human drugs, used only when the animal's health is threatened, not administered through feed, and if the drug residue will not reach the food chain.

Ahola shared additional research projects intended to develop standards for measuring animal welfare. Such research projects include focuses on exit velocity, video-based evaluation, chute scores, in-pen behaviors and branding.

This research will hopefully guide animal-welfare standards, because current standards are not science-based, he noted. Consumers are increasingly concerned with production methods, and the beef industry should take the lead on addressing these concerns, he concluded.



Editor's Note: This summary is part of the Angus Journal's online coverage of the 2015 Range Beef Cow Symposium, which was hosted Nov. 17-19, 2015, in Loveland, Colo. For additional coverage, to review this presentation's PowerPoint or to listen to the presentation, visit the Newsroom at www.rangebeefcow.com. The Angus Journal's coverage of the event is made possible through collaboration with the event committee and sponsorship of LiveAuctions.tv.