

Animal Care Certifications: What, Who, and Why

Mike Gamroth, Professor Emeritus
Oregon State University, 112 Withycombe Hall, Corvallis, OR 97331,
541-737-3316 Phone
mike.gamroth@oregonstate.edu

Sandy Stokes Goff
Stagecoach Consulting/Validus
3359 Stagecoach Road, Ames, IA
515-231-1410 Phone
stokesgoff@gmail.com

There is no question the public is concerned about how farm animals are treated. In a recent Purdue survey of a thousand participants, consumers put “produced on farms with animal welfare and handling standards in place” right behind fat and protein content in their selection criteria. Other surveys have reported that about 80% of people feel animals have rights related to pain and suffering.

People’s attitudes are shaped in part by local and national news programs that show animals unable to walk and being dragged onto trucks. Opinion documentaries like “Food, Inc.” and “Death on a Factory Farm” create doubts in public minds about the care animals receive on farms and ranches. Covert videos of animal mishandling go viral on the web before they even make it into traditional media. Concerns about animal care are not just public perception; there have been documented cases of abuse on farms.

Based on these public concerns, the food industry has become involved by specifying how animals are treated on farms where meat, eggs, and milk are produced for their suppliers. United Egg Producers has increased the cage space for laying hens and a 2011 state law in Ohio established a livestock regulatory board to establish space and care standards for livestock. At the same time the legislation phases out veal crates, gestation crates, and tail docking. Some progressive farmers would like their operations inspected and certified as “animal friendly” as a market tool. However, the movement to assuring proper animal care before selling your product is fast becoming a market-access issue, not an opportunity for a niche market.

Most producers recognize the payback of comfortable, healthy cows. And many of the practices on dairies are exceptional efforts when you consider the frequency and size of jobs performed regularly. Grooming freestalls and open lots takes a lot of time in a busy dairy schedule. By far, the majority of dairy farmers have a good story to tell and sound animal care evaluation and audit programs can help. Producers and consumers are at a crossroads. We have an obligation to care for the animals and consumers need reassurance animals are cared for properly.

The essence of animal care and welfare is providing comfortable, safe facilities and maintaining healthy animals that can have relatively normal social interaction. The American Veterinary Medical Association has defined the nebulous term “welfare” as:

“Welfare is a wide term that embraces the physical and mental well-being of an animal. Any attempt to evaluate welfare, therefore must take into account the feelings of the animals that can be derived from the structure and functions and also from their behavior.” (http://www.avma.org/issues/animal_welfare/default.aspx)

Animal care discussions are not new. Welfare ideals were published almost 50 years ago, based on a group of scientists and veterinarians in the United Kingdom that were charged with investigating and defining livestock husbandry standards (Brambell report, 1965). These ideals focused on the “Five Freedoms” for farm animals:

1 FREEDOM FROM HUNGER AND THIRST - We do this by providing access to fresh water and a balanced diet to maintain full health and vigor that is appropriate for stage of growth or level of production.

2 FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT - Providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable, clean resting area.

3 FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY OR DISEASE - Providing safe facilities and by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment of disorders.

4 FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NORMAL BEHAVIOR - Providing sufficient space, proper facilities, and company of the animal’s own kind.

5 FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS - Providing secure, calm, and relatively quiet conditions and handling which avoid mental suffering.

The majority of the livestock industry is providing these five freedoms in good husbandry practices to animals in their operations; however, what consumers are bombarded with are the exceptions that are exposed by various agendas. So what are the options are there for the industry to tell its story and reassure consumers? Doing nothing has not worked. Reports of animal abuse and misconceptions will continue. Certification within the industry by producers or their processors is seen as “the fox watching the hen house” by the public and doesn’t provide any aggregate data to determine overall successes and challenges in the industry. Systematic verification of practices and animal condition by someone not associated with individual farms has credibility with consumers and can provide the assurance important in their purchase decisions. These can be done through assessments, evaluations, or audits.

Assessments. Evaluating animal care is simply measuring animal condition and care practices against recognized standards. These standards are developed by individuals knowledgeable in care practices and how they affect animals. This evaluation can be done in an “Assessment” or “Evaluation.” An assessment reviews animal condition and care against standards to establish strengths (meeting or exceeding standards) and challenges (subpar conditions needing improvement). These are usually consultative sessions where reasons for challenges and possible

solutions are discussed. Assessments can enable a facility to develop an action plan and timeframe to conform to standards in a more formal certification process, such as a third party audit.

Audits. An animal care audit evaluates the client's facility against the same recognized standards to verify conformance or non-conformance to these specified requirements. Non-conformances need to be addressed by the client and are re-evaluated when the problem is corrected. Some criteria must be corrected immediately for the certification process to continue, such as colostrum to bull calves or lack of adequate feed or water. These are Critical Control Points. Neither assessments nor audits specify management of the farm, recognizing there are a lot of ways to reach compliance with the standards. When possible, outcomes are measured. For example, using body condition scores of cows can measure the effectiveness of the nutrition management on the farm.

So what happens during a third-party, external audit? If you are just starting a program, you contact the auditing program. They will provide a list of standards and request information on the numbers of animals by age or production status. Once you are in a program, your next audit is scheduled by the program. The auditor may contact you prior to the visit so management is available and records are up-to-date.

The day of the audit you need to schedule about 90 minutes for a short explanation of the audit process, an interview with the auditor, the review of written protocols and training materials, and reviewing animal numbers and locations. The interview is a friendly series of open-ended questions to help the auditor understand procedures he or she should see later in the audit. Then the auditor will begin evaluation of animals and the facilities.

The auditor will gather "evidence" that your farm meets or exceeds criteria which are a defined set of external or internal requirements that must be adhered to assure good animal care. The evidence is used to verify that audit criteria are being met (or not). Evidence can be gathered from documents such as treatment/processing protocols, records, interviews and observations with employees, and measurements of cow condition. All the evidence gathered is confidential and is simply used to support compliance with criteria.

Observing the housing and handling conditions are important basics, but cows tell a pretty good story. Are they in proper body condition for their stage of production? Are they relatively clean? Are they alert, but calm? Is there evidence of injury? Do they have sound feet? As cow measurements are recorded the auditor will observe work area cleanliness, pen/stall conditions, equipment use and wear, gates and fences, and hanging or other documentation to which employees can refer.

The auditor will review the farm mission statement for mention of animal well-being, the treatment/processing protocols that establish the consistent care given each animal, and the farm's emergency action plan for loss of power, fire, employee injury, and catastrophic animal loss and disposal.

A week or two after the visit you will receive a report of assessment strengths and challenges or a report of audit conformances and non-conformances. Each of the criteria will be listed with the evidence supporting the findings.

There are a number of programs available. I will list the most common third-party verification programs available. These programs all have policies which allow retail products to be marked with logos assuring the public the raw product was produced under humane animal care guidelines. There are other state, regional, and cooperative-led programs that have guidelines for animal care.

Validus Services “Animal Welfare Review – Dairy™”

<http://www.validusservices.com/>

Validus Services is a privately owned company based in Des Moines, Iowa. The company has years of experience assisting producers in complying with environmental rules and various quality assurance issues nationwide. They have performed over 11,000 Audits, Assessments and Management Plans.

Program Standard

The AWR-D Standards were developed by a panel of dairy experts with extensive producer input. Like most of the programs, the standards are based on Best Management Practices used on the farm to assure adequate animal care. Their audit process allows for continual improvement year to year. Auditors in each of their specific animal programs are trained and experienced in that program. The program has the highest number of observations based on statistical sample based on herd and group sizes, including high risk groups.

Oversight

The AWR-D program is structured under ISO 9001 guideline for training and oversight of quality management. All auditors are trained to ISO standards. Procedures, forms, and performances are reviewed under the USDA Process Verified program of the Agricultural Marketing Service. Training, standards, and re-certification of auditors are verified by the Professional Animal Auditor Certification Organization (PAACO) and by Dr. Temple Grandin (CSU). Additionally, they have certifications in progress to assure production and processing food safety under a Safe Quality Food (SQF) to ensure that products comply with rigorous food safety standards.

The expert committee thoroughly reviews program standards and current issues annually. Occasionally, issues will be reviewed with the committee as they arise.

Cost

The annual certification audit of AWR-D clients cost them \$1795 per day based on the time required for the audit.

American Humane Association “American Humane Certified™”

<http://www.thehumanetouch.org>

The American Humane Association has been around since 1877 when they first worked on care of animals during transportation. This Washington DC-based organization started their “Free Farmed” program a decade ago and changed the name in 2007. They are not affiliated with the Humane Society of United States (HSUS).

Standard

Like many groups involved in certifying animal care, their standards are based on the five freedoms as defined by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) of Europe. A producer downloads the standards and adapts his or her farm to meet the standards. The checklist has some very specific questions which may need interpretation. When the management feels they are ready, they request an inspection from the Association. Any deficiencies are noted and a plan for improvement must be submitted. The changes must be reported with evidence of compliance within 90 days of the initial inspection. Each year the farm will be reviewed.

Oversight

A scientific committee developed and guides the program standards for each species. The Association uses ISO-certified auditors trained by Validus Services.

Cost

The annual audit costs a producer \$1,795 and a royalty fee based on amount of milk packaged with the certification logo mark.

Farmers Assuring Responsible Management (FARM)

<http://www.nationaldairyfarm.com>

The National Dairy FARM Program™ is a nation-wide, verifiable program that certifies animal care and condition. Third-party verification ensures the validity and the integrity of the program to consumers. The program was developed and is operated by National Milk Producers Federation in Washington DC.

Standard

The FARM Standards came from the National Dairy Animal Well-Being Initiative, a set of guidelines developed independently for the nation’s dairy producers. Like the other standards, these guidelines are based on the five freedoms and focus on current issues, such as lameness. The program requires farm evaluation every three years by field personnel, sanitarians, veterinarians, or Extension personnel who are re-certified each year.

Oversight

Program oversight is provided by Validus Services. They train and re-certify evaluators, as well as provide random third-party verification of participating farms.

Cost

A producer must commit to three years in the program and pay 15 cents per adult cow per year. Cooperatives pay based on hundred weights of milk produced. The second-party evaluation is a contract between the producer and the certified evaluator so costs can vary. The third-party verification cost is covered by the program, if the farm is selected.

Humane Farm Animal Care <http://www.certifiedhumane.org/>

This program describes itself as “A national non-profit 501(c)3 organization created to improve the lives of farm animals by setting rigorous standards, conducting annual inspections, and certifying their humane treatment.” They are based in Herndon, VA and use the slogan “Remember, there are 10 billion animals in the U.S. that need our help.”

Standard

The HFAC standards for animal are based on the RSPCA standards also. Their standards have several prohibitions: no rBST use, and no ionophores, coccidiostats, etc. to boost growth, feed efficiency or milk production. Also tie stalls and stanchion barns are not acceptable cow housing. Participating farms are reviewed annually.

Oversight

The program reports endorsement by RSPCA, ASPCA, and HSUS, plus 41 other organizations. However, there is no oversight by PAACO or other livestock-related certifying groups. They have a scientific committee that reviews the standards.

Cost

The website shows participants pay an application fee of \$75 and a \$600 per day inspection fee. In addition, if the product is labeled “certified humane” the producer pays a certification fee of \$0.015 per hundredweight per month.

General Issues

Each program observes a sample of the cows for lameness, body condition, leg and hock lesions, and hygiene. These are called critical control points that indicate something may be wrong when the sampled animals exceed an acceptable limit. Following is a comparison of the limits for each program:

Critical Control point	AHA	Validus	FARM	HFAC
Lameness	95% score 1, 2	<5% score ≥ 3	90% score ≤ 2	<5% score 3, 4, 5
BCS	98% score >2, <4.5	<3% score <2 <10% score >4	90% score >2, <4.5 $\leq 5\%$ score <2	Differs by production cycle (2.5 to 3.75); <2 may not leave farm
Leg lesions	80% score 0, 1	<2% score 3	90% score 1 99% score ≤ 2	?
Hygiene	90% score 1, 2	<10% score >2	90% score <3	<5% have soil on bellies or udder

There are certain core issues in each of the programs. Evidence to support compliance may vary by program, but each is a “must” for assuring good animal care.

- 1) **A valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship.** The veterinarian overseeing health care for the animals must know procedures and challenges the farm deals with daily. They must be involved in the development of a herd health plan and be part of the periodic review of the plan. Ideally, they should be closely involved in developing the treatment and care protocols and in training employees to those protocols.
- 2) **Employee training.** There should be evidence of new employee training to the tasks they are assigned and general training in animal handling and farm policies. There should be evidence of continued training and a source of reference materials for each employee, such as posted protocols.
- 3) **Use of animal pain management.** Protocols and the herd health plan should include appropriate use of analgesics and anesthetics as prescribed by the herd veterinarian. Employees should know the timing, dose, and route of administration. There should be evidence of the appropriate administration equipment and drugs on the farm. Training should include safety with such drugs for the animal and the employee.
- 4) **Confined animals must have access to food & water.** In general, animals should always have feed and water. In some cases that is not possible. There should be evidence that those periods are as short as possible, depending on ambient conditions.
- 6) **Non-ambulatory animal management.** This is one that gets into every animal abuse video. The goal should be to move the non-ambulatory animal without harm. Legs and head hanging out of a

small bucket loader is not adequate. An adequate sized sled on the ground is the safest way to move an animal to a separate care area. Non-ambulatory animals must be able to reach feed and water. They should have shade and be protected from other animals.

7) Proper euthanasia. The farm should practice on-farm techniques approved by the American Veterinary Medical Association. There should be evidence of equipment used in good working condition and training of employees who can physically & emotionally carryout this procedure on cows/calves. The euthanasia protocol and practice should include timing of the decision based on the condition and prognosis of the animal. It should also include a practice for confirming death.

Most well-managed dairies can already comply with the standards used by any of these audit firms, but there is always room for improvement. Consider what this can do for the professional atmosphere of your farm and the overall image of the dairy producer. Remember, doing nothing hasn't worked.

Notes: