

Beef Sessions

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How we use the BQA feedyard welfare assessment as an educational tool

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Abstract

Animal welfare has become a major concern for the meat-consuming public. While the vast majority of producers take the welfare of their livestock very seriously, groups opposed to animal agriculture have been able to expose, by undercover video, acts of blatant abuse on multiple animal agriculture operations. In the past, producer organizations have made attempts to establish animal welfare programs, but these were actually little more than generalized animal welfare statements. As consumers have requested more knowledge and transparency in how their food is produced, producers (and their respective associations) have responded positively. One of the ways that the beef industry has responded is by designing animal welfare programs that apply objective measurements. The application of this type of program has become not only a benchmark for animal handlers, but it can also be used as a tool for education and assessing progress.

Key words: beef, BQA, feedlot, feedyard

Résumé

Le bien-être animal est devenu une cause majeure d'inquiétude pour les consommateurs de viande. Bien que la vaste majorité des producteurs aient à cœur le bien-être de leur bétail, les regroupements qui s'opposent à la production animale ont réussi à exposer, par l'entremise de caméras cachées, des actes flagrants d'abus dans plusieurs entreprises de production animale. Par le passé, des organisations de producteurs ont tenté d'établir des programmes de bien-être animal mais ces derniers n'étaient souvent que des déclarations de bien-être vides. Suite à la demande des consommateurs pour en connaître plus et pour une plus grande transparence dans le processus de production de leur nourriture, les producteurs (et leurs organisations respectives) ont répondu à l'appel. L'industrie bovine, en particulier, a

planifié des programmes de bien-être animal qui appliquent des mesures objectives. L'application de ce type de programmes est devenue non seulement un système de référence pour les préposés d'animaux mais aussi un outil pour l'éducation et l'évaluation du progrès.

Introduction

Progress, technology, and affluence in North America have resulted in our society becoming farther removed from agriculture. Consumers of animal agricultural products have a high level of trust in farmers and their veterinarians, but in recent years, several undercover videos have surfaced which revealed episodes of blatant abuse of farm animals. These videos have been very effective in causing our consumers to question how livestock are treated on our farms. While the motives of the groups making these videos are, at the very least, suspect, consumers' reactions to the videos have caused livestock producers and their respective trade associations to re-evaluate their approach to animal welfare.

In the past, beef industry trade associations would address animal welfare by offering guidelines that were strongly subject to interpretation. For instance, when addressing the use of electric prods, these guidelines would have statements such as, "Electric prod usage should be kept to a minimum." A "minimum" for one person could be considered excessive by another. Guidelines such as these were not truly conducive to promoting good animal welfare.

The Texas Cattle Feeders' Association (TCFA) developed a feedyard welfare assessment for its member feedyards. This assessment allowed for defining and objectively measuring many animal welfare parameters that were previously very subjective. TCFA experienced excellent member support for this program. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) used the TCFA model to develop the NCBA BQA Feedyard Welfare Assessment. The assessment addresses animal welfare, feed and water quality, residue avoidance and

facilities maintenance, and ensures the establishment of best management practices. For this discussion, we will focus on how Cattle Empire Feedyards has used the cattle handling element of the assessment as a benchmark and educational tool.

Discussion

Consumers' interest in animal welfare has increased in recent years, which has resulted in farmers and ranchers re-evaluating how they can provide assurance to their consumers that the animals under their care are treated appropriately. Cattle Empire has adopted the use of the BQA Feedyard Welfare Assessment to address these concerns. The cattle handling element of this assessment applies objective measurements to how cattle are handled in the processing facilities. These objective measurements include:

- Electric prod use must be less than 10% of the cattle.
- Cattle falling upon release from the chute must be kept below 2%.
- Cattle stumbling or tripping upon release from the chute must be kept below 10%.
- Cattle vocalizing prior to the procedure must be kept below 10%.
- Cattle that run or jump from the chute must be kept below 25%.
- Cattle miscaught in the chute are unacceptable, and are grounds for immediate failure of the assessment.

Electric Prod Use. When the assessment was initiated in our feedyards, this requirement caused the most concern for our processing crews. The fact that our crews were this concerned was very concerning to me, as it indicated that they had developed a heavy dependence on the electric prod, which was all the more reason to wean them from it. When workers carry the prod with them and have it in their hand at all times, it will naturally become their primary method of getting cattle to move. There are a couple of methods that seem to work well in reducing electric prod usage: 1) establish a location where the prod will be stored that is convenient for workers to retrieve it, but requires a conscious effort to get it when needed – a hook near the squeeze chute where the prod can be hung is very effective; 2) purchase the shortest prod/prod wand that can be found – this will require the worker to get close enough to the animal that the animal will frequently move on its own before the prod is used. Once the habit of prod dependency is broken, workers learn ways to handle and move cattle more effectively and they enjoy their work more.

Cattle Falling Upon Release. When cattle fall fully to the ground after they are released from the chute, one should look closely at the facility itself first. Most often, there is a flooring issue, such as being too slick to get adequate traction. In this case, woven-rubber floor mats made from old tires work well for enhancing traction. Another common cause of falling is when cattle must make a sharp turn immediately after leaving the chute. Woven rubber mats can help here, as well, but it may require a re-design of the facility to eliminate the sharp turn.

Cattle Stumbling or Tripping Upon Release. This could also be a flooring issue, but there are other potential causes. One common cause is chute operator error. For some reason, there seems to be an unwritten rule that the sides of the chute must be squeezed in as tightly as possible at the bottom, providing a very narrow walkway for the cattle. This practice tends to keep cattle off-balance, and can cause them to stumble as they leave the chute.

Cattle Vocalizing Prior to Procedure. If this happens frequently in hydraulic chutes, there may be an issue with the squeeze pressure of the hydraulic system. Another common cause is simple operator error. Chute operators who insist on operating the chute with one hand have a tendency to slam the squeeze or headcatch shut harshly, which may result in the animal vocalizing. If an animal vocalizes in response to an injection or a pregnancy examination, for example, there is no penalty.

Cattle That Run or Jump From the Chute. This particular measurement can be difficult to assess. Cattle temperament is a primary influence. It may not be fair to assess a crew when a particularly flighty group of cattle are being processed. However, if the cattle are not flighty and the cattle do run or jump from the chute, there is most likely a problem with aggressive handling in the alley/snake or in the tub/loading area. Using the tub as a holding pen and putting too many cattle in the tub can result in issues with aggressive handling.

Cattle Miscaught in the Chute. If an animal is miscaught in the chute and is not immediately released or readjusted, the entire assessment is automatically failed. A proper catch is when the headcatch is securely around the neck, there are no limbs protruding from the chute, and the animal is standing on its feet. The assessor must use discretion if the animal lies down in the chute, as there are animals that are obstinate enough that they will nearly always lay down when caught. If the headcatch is closed around the shoulders, ribs, flanks, etc., or if a leg is protruding through the side of

the chute, for example, the animal cannot be processed and must be immediately released or readjusted.

Support from feedyard management is crucial for success with this program. Initially, animal handling assessments were conducted quarterly. However, it became apparent in short order that more frequent assessments would be required. Creating and then maintaining good habits is vital, and quarterly assessments simply provide too much time for bad habits to develop. For some crews, weekly assessments may be required in order to break old habits and develop new habits. Once good habits are established, frequency of assessments can decrease. Another issue that may affect assessment frequency is employee turnover. If there is a high rate of turnover, assessments will have to occur frequently. In my experience, employee turnover decreases as these good habits are developed. The workers appear less stressed and enjoy their job more.

After a crew is assessed (usually by observing 100 head processed), I ask them to stop for a few minutes and go over their assessment with them. Being able to show

them the exact number of cattle that stumbled, vocalized or had the electric prod used provides them with a score that they can use as a benchmark. Progressive improvement is strongly encouraged, but competition between processing crews is not. As crews have worked harder to improve on their previous score, it is not uncommon for them to have only one or two penalties per 100 head of cattle processed.

Conclusions

The BQA Feedyard Welfare Assessment has become a tool for measuring progress at Cattle Empire. It would provide little value to anyone if it were to be used as a simple certificate to hang on a wall. As cattle handling has improved, there have been corresponding benefits such as fewer chute injuries, better implant scores, fewer employee injuries, and less employee turnover. The repeatability of the assessment provides the opportunity to establish benchmarks for progression and regression.