

DEVELOPING THE ANIMAL CARE ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

In 2005, the Canadian Pork Council launched the Animal Care Assessment, or ACA, an auditable on-farm program for animal care. The program follows in the footsteps of the on-farm food safety program, CQA®, which is now a core program in the Canadian hog industry.

Producers, already burdened with an increasing array of programs and requirements, voluntary and mandatory initiatives, may wonder why such a program is needed, and what value it will bring. This presentation will outline the pressures that led to the creation of the program, the steps and challenges faced in developing the initiative, and the current environment that makes having such a program critical.

PRESSURES TO DEVELOP AN ANIMAL CARE ASSESSMENT

The early indicators for the Canadian Pork Council to embark on the development of an animal care program were both domestic and international.

On the domestic front, the retail and foodservice sectors were asking, “What kind of care do hogs receive?” They started questioning the industry as consumers, in turn, were questioning them. The response from industry was, as it has been for some time, “Producers are taking good care of their animals. Recommended codes of practice are being followed. Trust us. It just makes sense that producers take care.”

But in this age, trust is not enough. The landscape has changed and both consumers and the farming community have changed with it. There is a gap between consumers, that are further and further distanced from the farming community, and the farm. Consumers expect animals to be given proper care and treatment and want evidence that this is being done.

It is providing this evidence that is challenging. To start, we simply do not know what production practices are being followed in terms of care of livestock. Recommended codes of practice are considered to be the industry norm, but there is currently no way to validate this. Other initiatives, such as food safety, have already moved to setting minimum requirements and ensuring these requirements are met through external reviews of both the records and the facilities through CQA®. And yet animal care has not.

On the international front, there has been a lot of activity. Certainly, Europe has faced extreme pressure from animal activist groups for quite some time. And these groups were very effective. Most of the Canadian hog industry is well aware of the pressures that began in the United Kingdom which led to a regulated outcome in 1992 to ban sow stalls by 1999. These pressures spread throughout Europe and the legislators made it their business to address animal care. By 2001, the European Union issued a directive outlining minimum standards for the protection of pigs, which included the phase out of sow stalls by January, 2013.

Animal activist groups in Europe also learned that while regulatory changes are useful, market pressures are often more timely and as such, focused actions on food retailers. This proved to be very successful as retailers were concerned about losing market share unless they took action. The result was a proliferation of private label programs, particularly in the U.K., with a focus on animal care.

When we examined what the U.S. was doing, the pressures were mounting. Again, animal activist groups were very much at the fore and this time, the focus was on the foodservice industry. McDonalds, Burger King and Wendy's all established an interest in animal care and setting requirements for their suppliers. Then in 2001, the Food Marketing Institute and the National Council of Chain Restaurants began to develop animal care requirements together. The National Pork Board did its part, as well, in recognizing the pressures on the industry and developed the Swine Welfare Assurance Program (SWAP). Launched in 2003, it was focused on producer education.

All the signals were that something needed to be done in Canada, otherwise, the agenda would be taken out of the hands of industry, and put into the hands of animal welfare and rights groups and legislators. The Canadian Pork Council brought together key animal care researchers, producers and governments to determine what should be done, and the seeds of the Animal Care Assessment were planted at the end of 2002 and early 2003. It was quickly determined that an auditable program with minimum animal care requirements was needed. The codes of practice were great, but they did not establish a bar, below which was unacceptable. This was needed.

CHALLENGES IN PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

But the development of an animal care program was not simple. The Canadian Pork Council had a good deal of experience in developing the food safety program, which was a relatively straightforward process as the development followed the guidelines of HACCP - or Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points. HACCP was generally accepted worldwide as a solid approach to food safety, although moving it to a farm setting was something of a novelty.

But there was no HACCP for animal care, no set of generally accepted guidelines that could form the foundation for the development of a program. And while animal care programs existed in other countries, there was a wide variety of approaches to consider.

For program content, some programs focused on the design of the building and the animals' environment, others on the animals themselves. For program assessment, some programs used a set of questions to which producers needed only to score a certain level overall, others would use a weighting system that put more weight on some questions, and others still would use a set of minimum requirements that had to be met.

Behind all this is the question of what are the appropriate indicators of animal welfare? This, we learned, depends on the questions you ask, and the questions you ask depend on how you see things, your values, and your perspectives. Even in science, background values play a role in the type of research in which scientists choose to engage. What is the best approach? Should we be examining animal health and productivity as a good indicator of welfare? Is it more appropriate to look at whether the animal is in as close to its natural setting as possible - or at least able to perform the functions that it would if in its natural setting? Or, should we be providing animals with choices and let them determine what constitutes their best welfare? (Weary, National Farm Animal Care Conference, 2007)

All this to say that there are many complicating factors in developing an animal care assessment and as there is no one clear path, the outcome will not be satisfactory to all.

What did we do? The group developing the program loosely used the HACCP approach, that is, determined where things could go wrong on-farm that could impact animal welfare, and ensured that steps are in place to eliminate or minimize these. This philosophy led to a program that includes questions that are animal-based (looking at the animal, body scoring, examining for cuts or bruises), design-based (looking just at the environment in which the animals live, for example, space), and process-based (ensuring basic protocols are in place to address animal care issues, such as euthanasia and handling sick pigs).

We also determined that the program approach would set out minimum requirements that had to be met in order to be on the program, rather than using a weighting system or scoring approach.

In terms of the values, we each brought our own set to the table.

WHY THE PROGRAM IS CRITICAL

The focus is now on encouraging participation. And this is difficult with no concrete financial incentives being provided. What are the incentives, if not financial? The incentives are in what lies around us - the global situation, a situation that is changing and changing fast.

Europe continues to focus on animal care, with considerable resources at the government level allocated to animal care issues. There is a massive undertaking called the Community Action Plan for the Protection and Welfare of Animals (2006). The EU is undertaking initiatives in developing welfare indicators, consistent labeling approaches, consumer information and raising the level of awareness of animal care issues at the international level. (Cornelius Rhein, presentation to the National Farm Animal Care Conference, 2007).

Australia and New Zealand have both issued new codes of practice for pigs that include minimum standards with regulatory bases, and educational elements. Both include phasing out sow stalls.

In the United States, at the producer level, the National Pork Board re-released its animal care program in 2007 to be more closely linked with the very successful food safety program, PQA. The new PQA Plus includes animal care. What is even more striking is the action that has taken place at the legislative level, with the banning of sow stalls in Florida, Arizona, and Oregon. These actions are critically important. The Florida action in 2002 was widely viewed as a unique situation. But when animal activist groups promoted the proposition to ban sow stalls in Arizona in 2006 in a voter ballot, it was taken very seriously by the agriculture community, who aggressively opposed the action. And yet the proposition passed. And the Oregon decision to ban sow stalls in 2007 took place at the state legislature, without a voter ballot.

And of course, we must consider industry action, at both the foodservice and processor level. The decision by Smithfield foods in early 2007 to phase out sow stalls in company-owned facilities took many by surprise, (as did the follow-up announcement by Canada's Maple Leaf Food to do the same). There was a flurry of announcements around the same time by foodservice players regarding sow stalls by Wendy's, Burger King and Wolfgang Puck.

The actions in the United States in 2006 and 2007 taken by industry and government regarding animal care, and in particular, pig housing questions, are unprecedented in North America and a sign of things to come. Animal care issues are not going away, as the European Union will attest to. They are here and here to stay. At a multinational level, the international animal health organization, the OIE, is tackling animal care, and will soon be looking at developing on-farm guidelines.

In view of many of these activities, we cannot rule out animal care as a trade issue. Perhaps it will appear in trade agreements. But more importantly, it will most likely end up in marketing efforts, playing out on product labels, billboards and magazine ads. And the Canadian hog industry is very vulnerable to trade actions, with a heavy reliance on export markets for both live hogs and pork.

The current pressures are large and looming and should provide the incentive to participate in an animal care assessment initiative. It is the basis on which we can address animal care actions in Canada.

CONCLUSIONS

Developing a national, credible, animal care program was necessary given both the domestic and international pressures facing the industry. But building the program is not enough. Producers need to participate, and to participate, they need to see a benefit. While the incentives are not financial, they are still clear. Without such a program, without such a defense, to domestic and international customers and the public, there is little to stand on.