Animal Welfare in today’s supply chain – Your role in meeting consumer expectations are you ready to be a CAWO?

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Whether you call them audits, evaluations or certifications, the reality is that anyone involved in food production today will have to demonstrate compliance to some standard through programs mandated at some point in the supply chain. While many feel as if animal agriculture has been thrust into the animal welfare debate, the reality is, other segments of animal agriculture have been entrenched in the conversation for years while the dairy industry has, until recently, remained on the periphery. However, the last several years have seen an onslaught of undercover videos targeting the dairy industry and its customers. As a result, industry groups have finally reckoned with the concept of accountability and what that means to agriculture. How has the industry responded?

Developing an effective and defensible approach to animal welfare requires that we recognize the similarities and differences across industries that have already faced the issues, some more successfully than others. It also requires that we understand what consumers and customers are seeking. Most importantly it requires that we empower the caregivers and stewards on the farm to promote and safeguard the welfare of dairy cattle. Accomplishing either one of these tasks alone will not be sufficient in meeting the challenges that lie ahead. We must be successful at each task.

While modern agriculture has focused on efficiency and production, relying on science to prove what can be done, consumer trust has been compromised as they question whether agricultural systems share their core beliefs about what should be done. Consumers expect us to tend to the welfare of the animals in production systems and we have moved from a social contract between the farmer and their stock to striving to maintain what is now a social license granted to us by consumers to benefit from the use of animals (Jamison, 2010). The welfare of dairy cows covers a broad spectrum of concerns rooted in society’s views of the role animals play in our lives. Consumers have become increasingly conscious of animal welfare issues, and they expect that dairy cows and other animals involved in animal agriculture are provided for in a way that respects their nature and strives to ensure good welfare. Clearly, consumers expect that abuse or neglect of animals is neither condoned nor permitted. But beyond that obvious expectation, we build and maintain consumer trust by demonstrating that we share a common ethic about animal welfare. If we are to maintain our social license to benefit from animals in agriculture it is essential that we resolve that farm practices must be congruent with consumer values. Our success will be dependent on our ability to assure consumers that we are doing the right thing and our ability to prove it.

Our success will also depend on our willingness to accept that changing consumers mind is only a part of the solution. Agriculture needs to be willing and ready to reconsider and discuss current practices. While much of what we do is defensible and acceptable by the public, we have
to acknowledge where improvements are needed and be open to change. Recognizing that change is required on both sides is the first step in building a more transparent system. As the disconnect between agriculture and the average consumer may be seen today more as a crevasse than a gap, patience and empathy will be key in developing the communication necessary to educate and reconnect both our consumers with the systems they depend on and farmers with the consumers they depend on.

One of the first steps in building trust is transparency. This has been successfully accomplished by the meat industry through 3rd party animal welfare audits. To understand how this success was achieved, one must understand what animal welfare audits actually accomplish. The reality is, there is no one size fits all. All audits are not created equal and they do not share the same goals. It is clear that consumer and customer expectations specific to the health and welfare of dairy cattle continue to evolve and mature. While special interest groups continue to capitalize on this concern to advance their cause, associating well-known brands with farms that are accused of being bad actors, there are an equal number of groups looking to use animal welfare to develop a market advantage. Much of this potential market advantage is the result of industries lacking the will or ability to implement a meaningful program that meets the needs of the majority of the supply chain leaving room for chaos and confusion in the animal welfare assurance market.

When it comes to developing animal welfare audits there are four fundamental motivations, each of which are not necessarily mutually exclusive, only one of which has demonstrated itself to be an effective approach: Risk Mitigation, Creating a Buffer, Developing a Market Advantage and Improving Animal Welfare. It is critical to recognize the differences between these approaches as they have a profound impact on the actual ability of a program to improve animal welfare. In lieu of the agriculture industry proactively addressing the issue and developing standards, increasingly we have seen food service and retailers write guidelines implementing audits and animal welfare “requirements”. The motivation behind these efforts is two-fold: to provide consumers assurance that animals raised for food are treated humanely and to mitigate the risk of being associated with a farm accused of animal cruelty, neglect or poor husbandry. A variety of audits and animal welfare program formats have been implemented across the world and within the United States. While some have been developed by food retailers, more recently NGO’s and some for profit companies have entered the fray offering “certification” of animal welfare practices resulting in more than four available “certification” audits within the U.S. dairy market alone. Other industries including poultry and pork have not fared as well. Poultry, having been the subject of scrutiny long before others, currently accommodates separate audits for nearly every customer in addition to any “certifications” that may be required. Audit companies have thus seized an opportunity to capitalize on the lack of industry leadership creating a variety of custom audits for each customer in addition to mass confusion within agriculture when it comes to animal welfare auditing. As of yet the only industry to avoid such confusion is the beef and pork packing industry. To understand why and
how they have managed to minimize the chaos we need to understand more clearly how and why it manifests.

**Risk Mitigation** – Animal welfare audits motivated primarily by risk mitigation generally focus on identifying high risk farms and removing them from their supply. This is generally accomplished by individual companies creating specific standards and rules to which they require compliance. This approach can be successful for risk mitigation **IF** all of the potential risks are identified and the supplier or buyer has strict control and a very clear line of sight over supply. As a result this approach works best for relatively small business that do not require massive quantities of a particular animal product. However, this approach does not tend to actually improve animal welfare as typically the result is a “cherry picking” of good farms while it forces problems out of the buyers supply into another pipeline rather than actually addressing animal welfare problems. If animal welfare is improved, any improvements tend to focus on “visually oriented issues” like dehorning and tail docking, which are certainly valid animal welfare concerns, but such programs often ignore issues such as lameness and employee training which represents major welfare issues in dairy cattle and feed into these other issues directly.

**Create a Buffer** – Animal welfare audits, programs or policy motivated primarily by creating a buffer between the farm and the customer at some level in the supply chain, have exploded in recent years. These programs tend to be those in which limited if any enforcement is provided and are partnered with broad communication focused primarily on what the expectations are rather than how performance is monitored or success is achieved. While some of these programs can be exhaustive in their description of suggested best practices, others are ambiguous enough to allow for success to take many shapes and sizes. Every animal industry has offered up such programs and have even attempted to create the appearance of actual verification of best practices. Other versions exist simply in the communication ether provided by various companies that make public statements and publish documents about their “standards” while never actually auditing against them or enforcing them. Programs such as these may offer buyers the risk mitigation opportunity to identify high risk farms, remove them from their supply or require that corrective actions be made, the former being the more common solution. Some buyers may actually adopt a program and implement it with the intention of both mitigating risk and improving animal welfare. Unfortunately such efforts are more often than not inconsistent, resulting in the development of several different versions of what is supposed to be the same program which only serves to add confusion and increase risk by allowing customers and consumers to develop one expectation while several factions within the industry manage to their own.

Regardless of the approach, the communication to both customers and consumers alike creates a façade of assurance that benefits the supplier, buyer and customer, leaving the individual farmer with minimal protection or allies. These programs may actually represent a major risk for the individual farmer as they often “agree” to adhere to guidelines which are in actuality rarely enforced or audited. Thus far any enforcement appears to have minimal
consequence or mandate yet, the communicated expectation by the buyer establishes cause by which buyers can terminate a supplier contract. As a result, if an individual farm finds they are the subject of an undercover investigation, any contracts are more often than not terminated immediately without an opportunity to defend their business.

Market Advantage – The most consumer facing approach taken in animal welfare auditing are those that either aim to take advantage of a market niche, create one or aim to change agricultural practices in the name of animal advocacy. The vast majority of these programs issue a label that can then be used to communicate to consumers that a certain “standard” has been met. Commonly seen labels are UEP certified (eggs), Red Tractor (in the United Kingdom) and Organic Certified. Less commonly recognized labels thus far include: American Humane Certified, Certified Humane, Animal Welfare Approved and Validus. Buyers that wish to market based on a certification or who are required to supply product from “certified farms” simply require that the farms be certified. The certification process is typically paid for by the farm directly to the 3rd party auditor. Farms are then audited against the “label claims”. While some audits require complete compliance, others use a point based system, while others may require no compliance at all. As with all programs there remains a fundamental question of “who is setting the standards?” While some programs are written with the input of academics with an established expertise in the welfare of the species of interests, other programs are written by a conglomerate of interested parties which may have little if any practical or expert knowledge in animal welfare. Several of these audits are also couched clearly on philosophical principles such as “organic”, or “pasture based” which have little actual relevance to animal welfare at all, catering to consumer misperceptions and capitalizing on a market opportunity. These systems can work to improve welfare if compliance to all of the animal welfare based standards is required. The failure of these systems to actually improve welfare stems from four fundamental flaws: (1) Point based systems without specific absolutes allow some farms to attain certification while not addressing serious welfare issues. (2) Because the farm is the entity paying the 3rd party auditing company there is a risk that the auditor is incentivized to provide a positive outcome to the farm. (3) Certification is typically executed in smaller markets which allows for “cherry picking”, providing well managed farms the opportunity to take advantage of a limited market. The farms that are in need of the most attention typically do not pursue certification. (4) Farms are typically audited 1 time per year or less and have to prove their success on a single day. There is no requirement to document intermittent second party audits by the herd veterinarian, or buyer.

Improve Animal Welfare – It is the opinion of this author that only one supply chain wide program exists that fits this motivation. This is partly due to the fact that developing an animal welfare program and audit that actually aims to improve animal welfare is the most challenging task. Doing so requires that the program requires continual attention to animal welfare on an ongoing basis rather than during an annual or biannual exam. The program’s standards and the audit tool should be developed by independent academics with specific expertise in animal welfare.
welfare for the species of interest while allowing for the input of all stakeholders to ensure that it meets the expectations of the supply chain, the consumer and can actually be achieved by the farmer. Programs such as this require that expectations are high and that standards are set by using data when available that demonstrates what well managed farms are able to achieve.

The only example of success is at the packer level - The pork and beef industries have achieved this at the slaughter house with the institutionalization of the North American Meat Institute’s (NAMI’s) animal welfare audit for slaughter. Today, nearly every major meat packer executes internal audits of their animal handling practices throughout the year and is subject to both 3rd party audits and audits of their customers. Internal as well as 3rd party audits identify problem areas and require a corrective action plan (CAP) be implemented. To ensure improvement documentation of the execution of CAP’s are required. Complete transparency is also allowed by 3rd party auditing reports being shared at the plant level. This approach has proven to work at mitigating risk and improving welfare not only in the data provided by the audits, but it is seen in the fact that the focus of special interest groups has moved from the processing plant to the farm. The fact is, since audits have been implemented, we have seen significant and dramatic improvement in animal handling at slaughter as documented by Temple Grandin. This approach has been successful simply because compliance was mandated throughout supply chain which minimized the effect of simply pushing farms out of sight. Additionally, both second and third-party auditors for the AMI audit are trained and certified through an independent organization that require in depth training and recertification on an annual basis.

While the supply chain continues to sort out which approach they will implement, the reality is that every farm will have to undergo some process in which the care and welfare of animals on their farm is evaluated. The outcomes of the process remain to be seen and will only serve to promote and protect the welfare of animals if accountability is embraced and required. In the meantime, confusion and chaos will remain in this sector of the market and continue to serve as an Achilles’ heel for special interest groups to attack and savvy marketers to take advantage of.

Now, what can you do in the mean time you wonder? Veterinarians are uniquely qualified to advance the welfare of all farm animals once they understand what animal welfare is. Animal welfare is NOT good production, high efficiency or low culling rates. Animal welfare, simply put and as Dr. Jim Reynolds taught me, is “doing what is best for the animal in front of you.” Whether it is ensuring calves are offered water at day one and fed enough milk to meet their daily caloric requirement, humanely dehorning, making sure lame cows don’t become severely lame cows, and making sure that every cow has a humane end, the herd veterinarian should be the leader of change and promoter of animal welfare on every farm, every day. Every farm, no matter how big or how small, should have a Chief Animal Welfare Officer – CAWO. The future of veterinary medicine lies in the 3 P’s – Protection, Promotion and Prevention. Protection and promotion of animal welfare and the prevention of disease. The CAWO can take
a commanding role on a farm if the dairy farmer invites and demands it. Diagnosing pregnancies and treating disease is not the path forward. Helping farmers design and manage systems where animal welfare is optimized and disease in minimized, even the rare exception is the future and is full of opportunities for the veterinarian who can envision the path forward.

REFERENCES