

**UC ANIMAL WELFARE ADVISORY COUNCIL
LISTENING SESSION**

**June 10, 2009
10:00am – 12:00pm
1043 Gladys Valley Hall
School of Veterinary Medicine
University of California, Davis**

**Comments by Jeremy Russell
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National Meat Association in recognition of our role in the food industry supports and promotes developing Best Practice guideline programs to advance animal health, nutrition care, welfare and handling in all phases of the industry inclusive of the farm, feed lot, auction market, transportation and harvesting activities.

NMA is part of a broad coalition of industry groups that are aggressively working to strengthen and enhance animal handling throughout the supply chain. These industry groups are committed to working with USDA to help their members comply with food safety and animal welfare laws and regulations.

And no discussion of animal welfare can be complete without a mention of the tremendous improvements that have been made over the years. There may still be a 'knock box' on the kill floor, but the industry's sledgehammer days are long gone. In fact, humane euthanasia has been the law for forty years.

The meatpacking industry has been subject to the federal Humane Slaughter Act since 1958. Federal inspectors, who are in packing plants continuously, enforce this act's requirements. These inspectors have the authority to shut down part or all of the facility. No other sector of animal agriculture is regulated and inspected for animal handling practices as thoroughly as packing plants.

USDA considers humane methods of handling animals and humane slaughter operations a priority, and has a Farm Animal Well Being Task Force to address sound standards for the care, handling, transporting, and slaughter of farm animals.

After the highly publicized video of workers abusing cattle at a plant in Chino, California, the USDA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) did an audit of the industry to determine if those events were isolated or systemic. The audit concluded "that the events that occurred at Hallmark were not a systemic failure of the inspection processes/system, as designed, by FSIS."

FSIS, or the Food Safety and Inspection Service, is the agency within USDA responsible to ensure compliance with the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. The Agency employs a veterinarian and slaughter-line inspectors at every federally inspected slaughter establishment. The veterinarian enforces humane slaughter methods throughout the entire plant.

OIG did have some recommendations, including a look at resources for oversight of cull cow establishments, and FSIS has been implementing many of the recommendations that OIG made. But there was no finding of systemic abuse or oversight failures. The complete document is available online or I can email it to you if you give me your card today.

And that's only the oversight component, proven solid and sound. At the end of the day, the final responsibility for animal welfare falls on the industry.

When it comes to animal care, our main partners are the beef producers who raise the animals. Part of being a successful producer has always been good husbandry, but we also have lots of recent industry activity for which to praise these ranchers, cow-calf operators and feedlot owners:

- A Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program was initiated in 1987 to provide cattle producers with the tools and training necessary to assure animal health and well-being, as well as provide a safe, quality product.
- A "Producer Code for Cattle Care," was developed in 1996; it is a comprehensive set of sound production practices. The code is clear that people who willfully mistreat animals will not be tolerated.
- And in 2003, the beef industry expanded the code into a best practices guide, "Cattle Industry's Guidelines for the Care and Handling of Cattle."

Of course, after the animal has reached the end of its growing cycle, it is ultimately sold for food. And that's when it reaches the packing plant. Some of the greatest challenges in animal handling come during transport and, of course, slaughter or as we like to say "harvesting."

Meatpackers have long advocated good animal practices – and unlike HSUS and other industry critics we believe that modern practices actually benefit good animal handling. It only stands to reason that bringing scientific discipline and industrial ingenuity to the issue will lead to improvements over time. In fact, a truly modern vision of what those practices could be was first initiated in 1991 when world renowned animal handling expert Dr. Temple Grandin of Colorado State University authored the *Recommended Animal Handling Guidelines for Meat Packers*.

Grandin and the industry took it a step further in 1997, determining ways to objectively score and assess handling and stunning practices in packing plants. The resulting Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs) encourage industry to measure handling and stunning in five core areas: 1) slips and falls; 2) electric prod use; 3) livestock vocalizations; 4) stunner accuracy; and 5) insensibility.

In her book, *Animals in Translation*, Grandin points out that “maintaining animal welfare standards in a meatpacking plant is an ongoing responsibility. *The whole principle of HACCP is that you have to keep measuring standards and compliance or everything goes bad on you.* It’s kind of like maintaining your weight: you have to keep on top of it.”

To keep “on top of it,” the industry has a number of voluntary initiatives including enhanced training, best practices and self-audits. In addition, retail and restaurant customers have taken an increasing interest in animal welfare by requiring animal welfare audits. For them it’s a matter of PR, but for meatpackers it’s good business.

That’s why it should almost go without saying that establishments set up verification activities to make sure that employees are not mistreating animals. Establishments require third party audits of their animal welfare systems to ensure that their programs are being implemented and executed properly. We encourage plants to go beyond the normal parameters of their program to ensure that humane handling is being effectively executed. And some plants have gone so far as to install video monitoring systems to assure compliance.

These plants have stepped up not only because it’s the “right thing to do,” but because studies have demonstrated the humane handling of livestock has many important benefits in addition to being ethical. Those benefits include:

- Higher quality meat
- Better plant efficiency
- Improved worker safety
- Enhanced morale

Animals that are handled calmly and humanely produce higher quality meat. Stress hormones can cause quality problems called “bloodshot” in beef or “PSE” in pork, both of which require that parts of the meat be trimmed away. Plants with optimal animal handling produce higher and better meat yields.

Also, good animal handling enhances both worker safety and protects the plant, as well. Animals that become agitated due to rough handling can injure workers and damage equipment.

For these reasons, NMA encourages plants to do everything possible to create calm, low-stress atmospheres that work with – rather than against – animals’ natural instincts. The benefits of these practices to workers, to meat quality, to equipment and most importantly to livestock are well-documented by scientific research.

The U.S. meat industry recognizes this fact and has embraced voluntary animal humane handling and audit programs that supplement federal requirements and help ensure that humane handling in U.S. packing plants is at the best level ever.

A small number of meat companies produce their livestock and meat using an alternative production system that some consumers prefer. The Agricultural Marketing Service is working out Naturally Raised standards. Some meat is organic, locally grown or free-range. In most instances, these products cost more than conventional products. And that is why it's so important to remember that all USDA-inspected meat plants are subject to federal humane regulations. If a product bears the USDA seal, it has met both food safety and humane regulations – no other special certification need apply.

And it is critically important that these regulations not be undermined. NMA is involved in a lawsuit now, because California passed a law which attempts to criminalize a normal animal behavior – hogs laying down when they're tired. What might have made sense when applied to cattle, a "downer ban," makes no sense when applied to an entirely different species. The courts have so far determined that this law is preempted by the Federal Meat Inspection Act and therefore not enforceable.

The reason that such preemption exists is because these national laws have developed over more than one hundred years to provide rational, science-based direction to the industry and they are standardized across the nation. There may be some ways to improve, particularly in the difficult area of handling older animals, but we would encourage this advisory council to be pragmatic and realistic in its approach to animal welfare issues. Progress does not come from philosophical musings and utopian fantasies. For real improvement we need practical on-farm, during-transport and in-plant solutions.