

Why Should I Know About Animal Welfare Audits?

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Abstract

Market driven demands for verification that animals used to produce food receive humane care have resulted in welfare audits becoming a reality for beef and chickens raised for products sold to fast food chains. The dairy industry is targeted for similar audits and the Dairy Quality Assurance Center (2002) was approved by the retail organizations Food Marketing Institute and the National Council of Chain Restaurants in 2002 for that purpose. Assessments are performed by a 3rd party with producer interaction. The audit is an on farm evaluation by a 3rd party checking compliance or noncompliance with written policies with no producer interaction during the audit. Several auditing organizations are available for dairy audits and certification, and one program can provide USDA recognized “Certified Humanely Raised & Handled” labeling. Bunk space; appropriate diet composition; feeding and feed storage; and water cleanliness and availability are covered in the audits. Although the programs cover similar topics, their outcome may be distinctly different based on the design, purpose, certification criteria, and standards on specific topics. Knowing what auditing tools are available and which programs fit your production needs will become imperative as audits become necessary for dairy product marketing.

Introduction

Concern for animal well-being (welfare) is not new to animal and veterinary science. However, documentation programs of animal well-being are relatively new. The term “animal welfare” should not strike fear in our hearts, just because activists groups have used it negatively against animal agriculture (Dairy Herd Management, 2006). Animal agriculture has been addressing animal welfare for decades, seeking to find the best housing and feeds among many other areas. We continue to address these issues with scientific research of practices that best fit our current livestock. Animal well-being has a variety of definitions, depending on the perception of the observer. “Animals can suffer” is an animal oriented definition, “animals are special” is a species orientation, and people’s ideal image is human oriented. Animals have specific needs, as we are all aware. Among those needs are nutrients specific to species and age, social contacts, exploration, thermoregulation, rest, safety, and psychological (security and novel environments).

Well-being is an ongoing process dependent on balancing stress. Positively, stress satisfies a need for excitement. Negatively, it interferes with homeostasis and life functions. The familiar thermal neutral zone diagram can be used to examine many well-being needs of animals (Figure 1). For instance, if this is applied to the number of pen mates, we know that cattle are social animals and

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isolation is extremely stressful for them. Alternatively, an overcrowded pen is known to result in increased fighting and reduced and variable feed intake. Finding the parameters of a condition that we plan to evaluate (such as social contact) is essential before it can be evaluated in the field. When confronted by one of these extremes past the critical point, animals can no longer adapt or tolerate the extreme and their welfare becomes compromised.

We must keep in mind that animal well-being is not just a physiological or psychological reality, but includes public perception. That public perception will likely involve anthropomorphism (attributing human needs/characteristics to animals) as the population making the perception is further removed from the farm.

The Evolution of Welfare Audits

Previously, not much progress was made by activist groups by addressing producers and packers, but a vulnerable link in the marketing process was found. Audits were initiated in response to demands of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals made of retailers. In 1999, the “McCruelty” campaign began and then ended when McDonald’s developed animal welfare standards. The year 2001 brought “Murder King” and later in 2001 “Wicked Wendys”. Both of these campaigns against the restaurants were ended as welfare standards were developed.

From these points of conflict, 3rd party audits were developed. Third party audits measure a producer’s or packer’s level of compliance against a prescribed set of animal care criteria. The driving force of the 3rd party audits has been the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and the National Council of Chain Restaurants (NCCR). Eighty five percent of food is sold in U.S. groceries through these organizations (FMI-NCCR Animal Welfare Program, 2003).

Presently the major programs available for dairy (Table 1) include: the Dairy Quality Assurance Center (DQAC) 2002, Humane Farm Animal Care (HFAC) 2003, Validus (formerly Environmental Management Solutions, LLC, 2004), and Farm Animal Care Training and Auditing (FACTA) has audited humanely raised veal farms (Reynolds, 2005). California has developed its own program, California Dairy Quality Assurance Program (based on DQAC). The DQAC was developed in 1990. It features internal audits and 3rd party certification by DQA auditors. It was expanded to include animal care in 1995. In 2002, DQAC agreed to revise “Caring for Dairy Animals reference guide” to incorporate FMI/NCCR recommendations. The 2002 revision included: 1) adding a space allocation guideline for a cow to free stall ratio of 1.2, 2) recommended switch trimming to be used rather than tail-docking, and 3) specific guidelines regarding ages and methods for castration and dehorning.

The HFAC is the primary niche market auditing program. It is an independent non-profit organization developed through funding from the Humane Society of the United States, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and regional and local animal welfare organizations. The standards were based on the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ Freedom Foods program in the United Kingdom and the Federation of Animal Science Societies’ Guide for the Care and Use of Agricultural Animals in Agricultural Research and Teaching (FASS, 1999) and were customized to U.S. farms by a scientific advisory committee. It requires additional measures that are related to organic farming, such as no use of hormones and traceability of feeds and products used. Guidelines for calves prohibit tethering, muzzles, or physical alterations to prevent inappropriate suckling. A “Certified Humane Raised and Handled” label can be issued which will add market value and the USDA-recognized label can be used for the products in stores.

Nutritional Aspect of the Audit Programs

Access to water and quality of water are evaluated in the audits. Accessibility and non-slip flooring in the watering area are scored. The animals' approach to and use of waterers are observed. Feed quality and quantity are determined by observations and by records. All animals on the farm will be assessed for life stage appropriate feed. The percentage of cows that can eat at once and the percentage of the day spent at the feed bunk may be scored. Adequate feeders and bunk space are observed, and when possible, it is determined whether or not old feed is removed on a daily basis (checking for moldy or dampened feeds). Proper feed storage, including protection from the elements, proper labeling, and vermin control, as well as separate storage of medicated feeds, are scored. Toxic compounds must be kept outside of the feeding and resting areas. Each audit will have specific paperwork that is requested from the producer (and therefore nutritionist).

What Will it Cost to Become Part of an Audit Program?

Costs to participate can vary from \$200 to 1,500 annually, depending on which program is used and other variables (Table 1). Auditor's fees, travel costs, administration fees, and frequency of audits can all contribute to the cost. Presently, the cost is on the packers and producers with no incentive, yet. Because of the marketing system, agriculture can not fix prices to recuperate the costs.

What are the Advantages and Pitfalls of Audit Programs?

Problems with the audits include standardizing the system; presently they are not standardized by species, auditing firms differ, and auditor qualifications vary. A study highlighting difference of the DQAC, HFAC, and University of California-Davis (UCD) program indicated that

selection of the available assessment programs for welfare of animals on commercial dairy farms is important to determine outcomes (Stull et al., 2005). Although the three programs that were assessed covered similar topics, the outcomes reflected the design, purpose for assessment, certification criteria, and differences in specific standards of each assessment tool (Table 2). Because of this type of problem, a national oversight program has been developed, Professional Animal Auditors Certification Organization (PAACO; <http://www.animalauditor.org>). This group is comprised of animal scientists and veterinarians with the goal "to promote the humane treatment of animals through education and certification of animal auditors and to promote the profession of animal auditors".

Summary

Animal husbandry should be equivalent to animal welfare, providing clean, dry and comfortable housing, nutrition balanced for stage of life, trained employees, pain control, euthanasia programs, and verification that these needs are being met. But back to the original question, why should I know about animal welfare audits? Firstly, to make an informed decision regarding participation in the programs that are offered. Dairy Quality Assurance 5-Star program is an assessment and verification/audit program. Validus is an assessment and audit program. Humane Farm Animal Care provides an opportunity to become certified for a niche market prior to participation in that market. Presently, you will need to ask yourself, which program will benefit your operation? Do you want or need to sell to a market requiring audits? You will probably eventually need to participate to remain competitive. Cost is presently being covered by producers. However, in due course, the question will become "Can I afford not to participate?"

References

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Table 1. Audit programs, internet addresses, phone number, and e-mail addresses.

Program	Internet address	Phone	E-mail
DQAC ¹	www.dqacenter.org/dairy%care.htm	1-800-55-DAIRY	info@dqacenter.org
HFAC ²	www.certifiedhumane.org	703-435-3883	
AWAP ³ ("SES", Inc.)	www.awaudit.org	1-800-897-1163	
AWARE ⁴ (Validus)	www.emslc.org	1-515-278-8002	voldl@validuservices.com

¹Dairy Quality Assurance Center

²Humane Farm Animal Care

³Animal Welfare Auditing Program

⁴Animal Welfare Assurance Review and Evaluation

Table 2. Ranking of 10 dairy farms in California using 3 audit programs: Dairy Quality Assurance Center (DQAC), Humane Farm Animal Care (HFAC) and the University of California Davis (UCD) (Stull et al., 2005). Bolded numbers are ranked equally across audits.

Dairy ¹	DQAC, rank	HFAC, rank	UCD, rank
A	7	4	3
B	5	2	8
C	3	1	4/5
D	6	3	4/5
E	8	7	2
F	2	8	7
G	1	6	1
H	10	10	10
I	4	5	6
J	9	9	9

¹ Dairy farms were designated with a letter to preserve confidentiality.

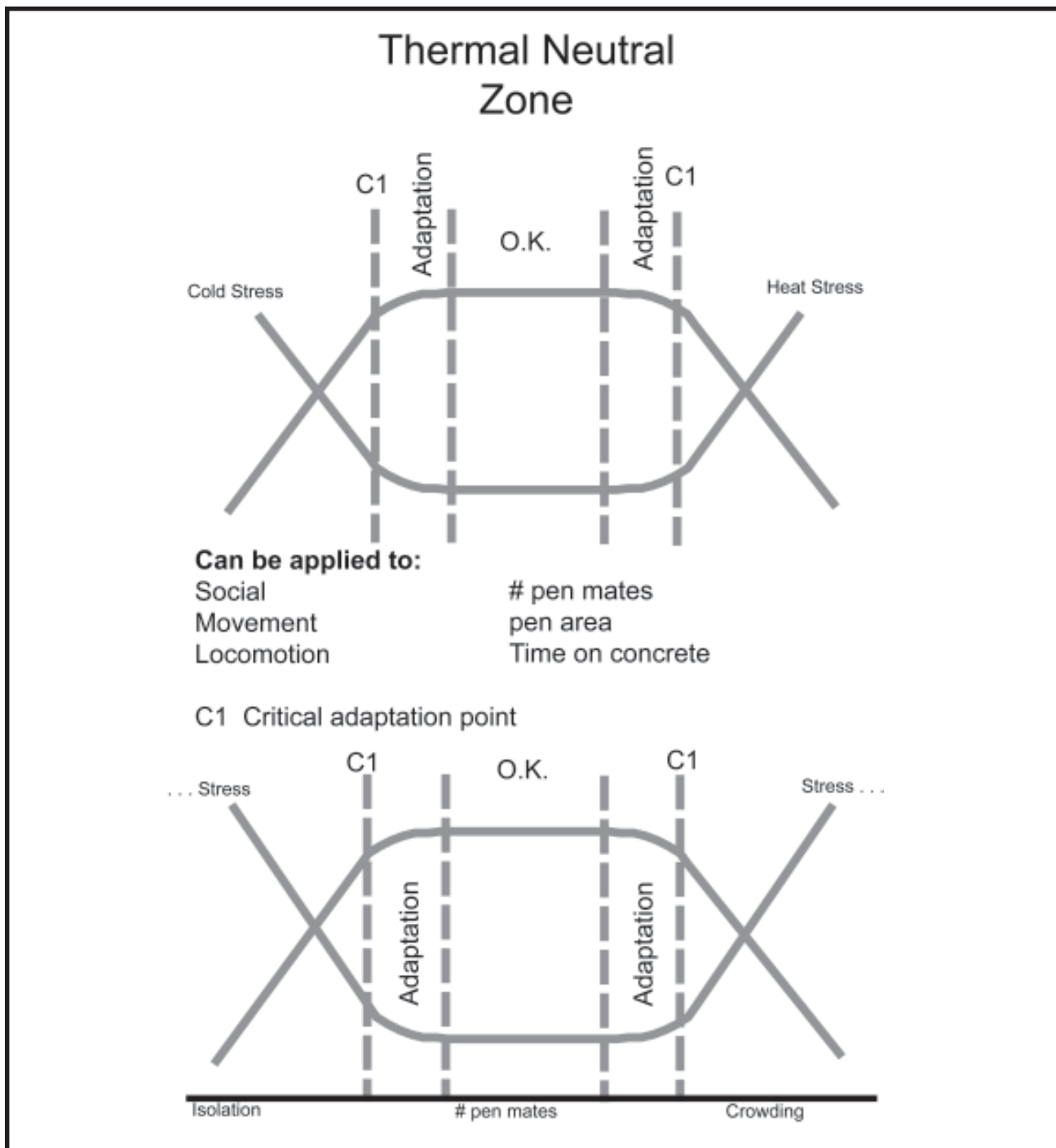


Figure 1. Thermal neutral zone diagram in the top panel shows critical (C1) temperatures, thermal neutral zone (O.K.), and areas where the animal has to adapt. The lower diagram shows how this concept can be applied to social stress. Isolation and crowding are the extremes, with C1 areas defining the critical number of pen mates to which the animal can adapt.