

What you need to know about animal welfare audits

Dr. Jim Reynolds of the University of California – Davis answers questions on the importance of animal welfare audits to dairies



Here's the important point: Animal welfare can and should be judged in several different ways, says Jim Reynolds.

As a veterinarian, Jim Reynolds, has increasingly become involved in dairy animal welfare issues. Dr. Reynolds worked on down-cow legislation in California and served as the past-chair of the American Association of Bovine Practitioners Animal Welfare Committee.

He is a founding board member of the Professional Animal Auditor Certification Organization (PAACO). Dr. Reynolds helped to develop the welfare assessment and audit tools for Validus, a company for which he performs dairy assessments and audits.

Dr. Reynolds has been a dairy and beef veterinarian in California since 1982 and is currently Chief of Service for Dairy Production Medicine with the UC-Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

PRO-DAIRY: What is meant by dairy animal welfare?

Reynolds: Dairy animal welfare includes care and housing of animals so that they are comfortable and content. Animal welfare can be assessed, or described, using three approaches:

1. Production or physiological parameters. These have traditionally been used by those of us in the industry to assess farm animal welfare. We measure cortisol to see if animals have a stress response. Or if cows have high milk production, we conclude they must be well cared for.

These parameters must be used cautiously because stress responses can be short term or high milk production result from high cull rate.

2. Comparing farmed animals to similar animals in nature. This approach might, for example, contrast cows in confinement to ones on pasture. If the differences appear large, we can infer that welfare may be compromised.

3. Inferring what an animal thinks or wants. Is the animal happy or distressed in its environment?

At first, this method appears unreasonable to many livestock owners. But reflect for a moment: Do you think cows prefer clean, dry bedding out of the rain? Or do you think they prefer to lie down in the rain in mud and manure?

The dairy industry embraces this method

of evaluating animal welfare when it markets milk and cheese by advertising “happy cows” on pasture, singing and talking to each other.

Here's the important point: Animal welfare can and should be judged in several ways. There is a desire to use science to determine the appropriate methods to assure good husbandry, but welfare is not a totally scientific issue. It's a consensus of opinion, arrived at by considering the available science, people's perceptions and society's needs.

Temple Grandin has said that farms should manage their animals so that average people can walk through the farm and be comfortable with everything they see. She's right. If we do things to cattle that we have to hide from our consumers, we probably should reconsider those practices.

PD: What is a dairy animal welfare audit?

Reynolds: Audits are objective, third-party, repeatable verifications that the husbandry of animals conforms to predetermined standards. They assure purchasers of dairy products that animals are being taken care of properly.

PD: Why should a dairy have an audit?

Reynolds: Dairies have requested audits for several reasons:

- Some owners want to verify they are caring for their animals as well as they can. And they want to be recognized for their efforts.

- Others want to market milk and meat as coming from animals that were cared for under acceptable standards. This niche marketing is becoming more common in the marketplace.

- Consumers have been taking more interest in the housing and welfare of farmed animals, and retailers want to assure their customers that animals are well cared for. Some retailers are using audits to help set them apart from competitors.

- A less apparent, but important, reason to have an audit or assessment is to provide the dairy with a report on essentially all management areas. It can be valuable to a dairy to receive a third-party review on employee training and performance in the areas of animal handling, comfort and cleanliness, and treatment. An audit tells owners

FYI

- To contact Dr. Jim Reynolds, email jreynold@vmtrc.ucdavis.edu

- To learn more about the companies that conduct audits, see these websites:

The Dairy and Beef Quality Assurance Center: www.dqacenter.org/

Farm Animal Care Training and Auditing (FACTA): www.factallc.com/

SES Inc.: www.ses-corp.com/

Validus: www.validusservices.com/

- The Professional Animal Auditor Certification Organization (PAACO) certifies the training of individual auditors. PAACO has begun training people to become slaughter house welfare auditors. See its website: www.animalauditor.org/paaco/

whether their management goals and desires are being achieved.

As a veterinarian, I find welfare assessments and audits valuable because they provide management structure to dairies in all of the areas that are important for husbandry and profitability. When animals are well taken care of, they're healthier, better performers and more profitable.

PD: How is a dairy audit conducted?

Reynolds: Audits must be structured so they can be repeatable and defensible. An audit normally begins before a farm visit with a questionnaire filled out by the dairy. It provides the auditor with basic information.

Then the auditor conducts an entrance interview, asking questions regarding the numbers of animals and requests documentation of protocols, training programs, euthanasia practices, and milking and feeding schedules.

The auditor inspects the animals and facilities, watches workers and asks them questions.

The farm portion of the audit ends with an exit interview where the auditor reviews his observations and can ask additional questions. A final report is filed with the audit company and sent to the dairy.

PD: What are some examples of areas evaluated in a dairy audit?

Reynolds: An auditor has responsibility to observe, ask and investigate each area in an audit until satisfied on two points: On the day of the audit, animals were cared for according to the agreed to processes. And, two, these processes are likely to be continuously followed.

Nutrition is one broad category evaluated. The audit doesn't focus on the actual ration since it changes over time and would be difficult to assess. But the audit determines if animals have sufficient bunk space so they can eat when they want, enough access to water so they can drink when they want, and feeding and water areas that are clean and protected from severe weather.

Body condition scoring (BCS) is the final audit point for nutrition. If cows are in the industry-accepted range of 2.5 to 3.75 BCS, then the nutrition program is performing well and cows are well cared for on this audit item. If too many cows are too thin or too fat, then the nutrition program is not well managed.

Lameness is audited in a similar way. The dairy should have a written program to prevent lameness and also to treat and handle lame cows. There should be training programs on the importance of preventing and treating lameness.

Employees should be able to recognize a lame animal early, know what to do regarding getting attention to the animal, and understand proper treatment and pain relief.

The auditor verifies that a system exists to meet all of those points so the animals' welfare is served. Then the auditor assesses animals by using locomotion scoring to determine how well a dairy is controlling and treating lameness.

PD: What companies offer dairy animal welfare audits?

Reynolds: To my knowledge, there are three U.S. companies.

1. The Dairy and Beef Quality Assurance Center's Dairy Quality Assurance (DQA) Five-Star Quality Assurance Program. This program can be used as a guide to conduct a self-audit of your dairy. You may register the results of your self-audit with the DQA Center free of charge. Finally, a third party, usually your veterinarian, trained in the proper use of the various scoring systems, can verify the results of the audit.

2. Farm Animal Care Training and Auditing (FACTA) has primarily provided audits to the swine industry and some in the veal industry.

3. Validus, the program I helped develop and use, began initially to provide dairy welfare assessments prior to a dairy asking for an SES Inc. audit. SES was designated to provide, for profit, all on-farm welfare audits by the National Council of Chain Restaurants (NCCR) and Food Marketing Institute (FMI) as they developed animal care and welfare guidelines. However, the SES Inc. program, intended to begin in 2002, didn't develop by that time.

Validus and FACTA will provide trained, certified auditors to conduct an audit using their independently derived audits. All audit results are confidential. An audit like this may well cost several thousand dollars.

Editor's Note: PRO-DAIRY exploration of the topic found that SES has completed its own Animal Welfare Audit Program (AWAP), making a fourth audit available to dairies. But for the most part the industry is not actively conducting audits. According to Eric Hess of SES Inc., the company discontinued its website pertaining to audits because they had audited only a couple of dairies in the last year and a half.

Keith Carlson of the DQA Center has seen companies, such as Dannon Yogurt, develop their own audits and conduct them on their dairies. Based on discussion with various milk handlers, Carlson believes that the Five Star program will soon be conducted on many member farms. ■