
The Development and Implementation of Animal Welfare Standards

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Introduction

Canada has been one of the world leaders in the area of agriculture and agri-food for several decades. Much of the land in this country is not only suitable, but ideal, for the growth of various crops and the production of food animals. These areas of production continue to grow and improve year to year, helping to maintain Canada's reputation as a leading producer and exporter of agricultural products. However, there is one glaring area of concern in Canada's agricultural industry, that of animal welfare standards.

Animal production represents a significant portion of Canada's agriculture industry according to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. This area includes both production of meat animals and production of animals providing by-products for human consumption (milk, eggs, etc.). As these various production systems have become more intensive, with the development of larger farms maintaining more animals in a smaller space, there has been a subsequent decrease in the quality of life of the animals (Fraser, 2008). It is clear that Canada is at a crossroads wherein the opportunity lies to become a world leader in the production of ethically raised, welfare-friendly meat and by-products. This opportunity requires the collaboration and integration of both federal and provincial governments, policy developers and analysts, animal welfare scientists, national/provincial commodity organizations, and the public. Through the development of legislation, policies, councils/committees, and a national labelling program, Canada could create a system of value-added products that cater to a rapidly expanding niche market demanding availability of ethically raised foods on a global scale.

Animal Welfare Law in Canada

It must be acknowledged that Canada is lacking in sufficient animal welfare legislation. One must simply look to the laws to determine that, on a federal level at least, Canada has not one law pertaining specifically to the welfare of animals, farm or otherwise. There is very little federal legislation concerning the welfare, protection, and treatment of animals in any capacity. However, I will briefly outline some of the legislation in Canada that endeavours to regulate the production and care of animals.

The *Health of Animals Act* attempts to define conditions for the humane transportation of animals in Canada by providing regulations and requirements for this stage of production.

However, this Act is in need of a significant revision based on new evidence. Recent research suggests that animals require much more space, longer rest periods, more available water, deeper bedding, etc. (Minka and Ayo, 2009; Warren *et al.*, 2010) than current standards require. The *Health of Animals Act* utilizes inspectors from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) to enforce the regulations through routine inspections and site checks. Although this would seem to be an efficient means of inspection, there continue to be reports of non-compliance, suggesting that inspections may not occur frequently enough and/or that penalties are insufficient to prevent future infractions.

The *Meat Inspection Act* sets standards for the humane handling and slaughter of food animals in slaughter facilities. The CFIA stations inspectors at these facilities to monitor operations. However, here again is the issue of insufficient standards. Recent research has suggested the need for the creation of new slaughter standards, both for facility design and handling procedures (Grandin, 2010).

The recommended Codes of Practice for the Care and Handling of Farm Animals (National Farm Animal Care Council) perhaps goes furthest in the effort to maintain sufficient animal welfare standards on Canadian farms. However, these codes often suggest only minimal standards of care and handling. Additionally, guidelines are frequently vague and non-committal with respect to specific aspects of animal production (e.g., insufficient guidelines on feeding management protocols). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these codes are merely recommendations and cannot be enforced in any meaningful way.

Each province and territory within Canada has its own provincial legislation on the care and welfare of animals. While all of these laws are quite general in scope, some are hopelessly outdated while others state that only negative procedures outside of “normal industry standards” will be considered for prosecution. In fact, many of these federal and provincial laws completely exclude certain practices used in animal production because these practices meet the industry standard (e.g., tail docking in pigs or dairy cows). The problem is that the normal industry standard does not provide sufficient welfare for the animals according to recent research conducted to determine the needs of production animals.

It should be noted that there is, in general, insufficient inspection of farms in Canada, resulting in animals sometimes living in deplorable conditions for lengthy periods of time, essentially until a complaint has been filed. Other parts of the world (e.g., the European Union,

Australia/New Zealand) have created and enforced new legislation in recent years that largely improves the quality of life, from birth through to slaughter, for farm animals (Bonafos *et al.*, 2010; Thornber, 2010). This legislation provides for the needs of animals while also satisfying consumer demand for welfare-friendly products. Regular inspection of farms and facilities is conducted through farm audits by veterinary or ethology specialists. Standards are enforced in this way and those found in non-compliance face serious penalties.

One key point in what all this means for Canada is that, as these nations continue to improve their legislation periodically, they will expect trading partners to do the same. In fact, it is likely that the European Union will no longer import animal products from countries lacking high animal welfare standards in the near future. Thus, Canada would greatly benefit from introducing animal welfare regulations and laws to the agricultural industry and maintaining an inspection/audit procedure to ensure compliance of farms.

“Growing Forward” Agricultural Policy

Canada has made great strides towards the future through the Growing Forward Agricultural Policy Framework. This document contains excellent suggestions, innovations, and strategies for promoting Canada’s agriculture and agri-food industry. However, one major shortfall of this document is that it contains no provisions, suggestions, or strategies for the development of strong animal welfare policy or legislation. As animal welfare is one of the major issues at the forefront of agricultural production worldwide, it would seem that such policies are not only desirable but, indeed, required.

On this issue, Canada may benefit from the examples set by the European Union and, more recently, Australia and New Zealand. These countries have developed animal welfare directives (legislation/policy) for several different types of animal production (Bonafos *et al.*, 2010; Thornber, 2010). This has been done through the development of various committees and councils of individuals representing a vast array of different interests. These groups conducted on-farm surveys and audits using criteria that were developed by examining the results of animal welfare research. The directives were then imposed over a reasonable length of time, allowing producers to adjust gradually and to make changes in an economic, but timely, fashion (Bonafos *et al.*, 2010).

The development of both federal and provincial animal welfare policies would ensure the proper treatment of all farm animals within Canada, from birth through to slaughter. Additionally, there would be a need for collaboration between the federal and provincial bodies to ensure a national standard of care. The provincial policies would be created, revised, and enforced through the development of carefully selected committees. These committees would include members from a variety of different areas, including, but not limited to, animal welfare scientists, veterinarians, members of independent commodity organizations, producers, and members of the general public. The inclusion of non-animal users on the committee would help to ensure that animal welfare policy reflects the level of care desired, and expected, by consumers. The provincial organizations would be responsible for conducting on-farm animal welfare audits, which would contain criteria against which each farm would be measured. Farms found in non-compliance would be issued penalties, enforced by the provincial organizations and independent commodity organizations (e.g., Alberta Pork, Dairy Farmers of Ontario, etc.).

Finally, these federal and provincial organizations would work together to create a national labelling program for Animal Welfare Friendly Foods. This program would utilize colour-coded labels pertaining to different levels of animal welfare standards (i.e., minimum, average, and excellent). Consumers would then have a choice of which product they wish to purchase with the highest welfare standards reflecting a higher price point. Each farm, following a thorough audit procedure, would be certified at some level of the program. Suggestions for future improvements would be provided to producers wishing to reach the next certification level.

The use of a labelling program with clear, well-defined criteria at each level would also aid in advertising our high animal welfare standards to Canada's trading partners. The niche market for animal welfare friendly products is growing on a global scale and it is likely that many areas of the world will need to increase their imports of such products in order to meet consumer demand. As such, Canada may benefit from an increase in production of such products.

Animal Welfare Scientists and Research

Animal scientists and researchers will play one of the most important roles in moving Canada forward on the animal welfare front. Canada is home to two globally recognized animal

welfare research groups, one at the University of British Columbia and one at the University of Guelph. There are other (generally smaller) animal welfare projects underway through any university or college that staffs an animal ethologist and through the five veterinary schools in Canada. Finally, Canada also employs animal welfare scientists through its provincial and federal Agriculture and Agri-Food facilities. Thus, Canada is one of the world leaders in conducting animal welfare research.

Despite our research record, however, Canada is still far behind other parts of the world (e.g., the European Union) with respect to translating this research into legislation and policy. The future role for animal welfare scientists in Canada appears to be very clear. This research must be broken down (through university and governmental extension programs) into material that can easily and consistently be used by producers and easily integrated into existing agricultural operations. Such extension protocols and information would be made available through the creation of provincial and federal animal welfare committees. These committees would also develop criteria against which local farms could be measured during on-farm animal welfare audits (Swanson, 2010). By utilizing the results of the animal welfare research that is conducted around the world, changes in policy can be easily justified to producers and easily understood by the public.

The key features of animal welfare research are to recognize, and strive to provide, the five freedoms (Webster, 2001) to animals: 1) freedom from thirst, hunger, and malnutrition; 2) freedom from discomfort; 3) freedom from pain, injury, and disease; 4) freedom to express normal behaviour; and 5) freedom from fear and distress. It is unreasonable to assume that any intensive livestock system will be able to immediately meet all of these freedoms in an exceptional way. However, by conducting research to determine which needs, or freedoms, are most important to, or valued by, animals, we can begin to develop industry standards that ensure the best quality of life for animals under our care.

It is not enough to provide only basic housing, food, and water to animals and we cannot expect animals to be content (i.e., not suffer in any way) under such minimal conditions. To use an example from the literature we will consider the case of the laying hen. The most common housing system in North America is that of the battery cage system. Although this system allows maximal production, it does not consider the welfare of the hen to any great degree in that, in addition to being crowded for space, the hens are deprived of resources such as perches, nest

boxes, and dust baths. Recent research has shown that laying hens, when given the choice, will choose to use these resources when they are available, will show an operant response, and will work to get access to the resources at certain times of the day or after being deprived for some time (Keeling, 2004). Additionally, laying hens will show behaviours indicative of frustration when deprived of these resources, going through the motions of the behaviour (e.g., sham nest-building or sham dust-bathing) despite the lack of necessary resources (Keeling, 2004). In spite of this evidence, these resources have not become industry standards or requirements and, as a result, the welfare of laying hens in Canada continues to be an issue. This is only one example where animal welfare research has made clear the requirements of the animal. We must now strive to develop standards that allow the animals to live as freely and comfortably as possible while maintaining economical production. This is quite a challenge for animal welfare scientists and is a challenge that is happily taken up by the research community with the goal of improving the quality of life for agricultural animals.

The role, then, of these committees of animal welfare scientists is simple, yet challenging. They must translate research into industry standards and then into animal welfare policy and legislation. Finally, these committees must use the minimum standards of care to assess the overall on-farm animal welfare for individual producers. They will then be able to assign one of the animal welfare-friendly levels to that producer as well as give advice on how that farmer may reach the next level, with subsequent value-added rewards offered through the certification process.

National/Provincial Commodity Organizations

One of the biggest challenges to change in the agriculture industry comes from the producers themselves, often voiced through national or provincial commodity organizations (e.g., Dairy Farmers of Canada, Alberta Pork). These organizations were originally established to speak for producers while providing some leadership to the industries. They are often educational resources for the public, as well. The organizations are not government-funded or controlled, which is important in that they are able to recognize the needs of producers without political conflicts.

The inclusion of these organizations in the development of animal welfare policy and legislation (and also the development of a labelling program) is crucial. Animal welfare scientists

do an excellent job of determining animal preferences, needs, and requirements. However, often the translation of this research into reality is poorly understood by academics working in a sterile research setting. The commodity organizations would play a major role in the translation of this research into practical on-farm standards. Collaboration between the scientists and the organizations (representative of the producers) would ensure practical standards while continuing to maintain high levels of animal welfare throughout the industry.

Furthermore, many commodity organizations (e.g., Alberta Pork) state in their objectives and/or mandates that they strive to ensure adequate animal care, direct research funds into improving care of animals, and support the development of animal care assessment models. Thus, it is clear that animal welfare is recognized as a priority and a necessity by the commodity organizations and, by extension, the producers.

Another key area for commodity organizations would be in educating the producers that they represent. Many producers do not recognize the value of animal welfare research and believe that this type of research results in the creation of impractical standards of farming. They do not see the potential for value-added products in the market or the potential increase in profits to be made from improving the animal welfare on-farm. Commodity organizations need to stress the importance of ethical treatment of animals and the benefit of, and potential for, producing value-added products. Commodity organizations would need to ensure that all member farms become certified at some level within the labelling system. It would greatly aid the transition to improved animal welfare standards in Canada if these organizations would make the minimum animal welfare standards a requirement, rather than a recommendation. The creation of consequences for non-compliance of member farms would further aid in enforcement of animal welfare standards.

The Public

Public understanding of where food comes from has drastically declined in recent years. It is not uncommon to find children who have never seen a farm or touched a cow. This is partly due to the intensification of livestock systems over the last few decades and the inability of the public to see and interact with animals in these systems. However, this lack of understanding is also due to a low degree of transparency in the industry with respect to on-farm animal care practices (as well as transport and slaughter practices), and to a reduction in education of the

public with respect to agri-food origin. Most individuals cannot tell you what part of a cow the steak they have just purchased is from. They do not know the difference between intensive and extensive farming. They do not know the needs and/or desires of a laying hen. They do not know the extreme restrictions placed on gestating sows by gestation stalls. They do not know how much milk the average Holstein cow in Canada produces each day and how much energy it takes to produce this milk on a daily basis, often to her detriment.

However, in recent years there has been an increase in overall agricultural awareness in society. Many people have come to the realization that we are so far removed from the farms that we *don't* know where our food comes from. Many of these individuals have made an effort to become increasingly aware of agriculture and agri-food practices. The creation of animal rights and animal liberation movements has been one of the unfortunate results of this increase in awareness. These movements do not truly understand the practices used on-farm and do not recognize the mediation of animal welfare organizations (SPCAs and humane societies). It is more important than ever that the members of agriculture and agri-food industries educate the public on common practices and standards. Perhaps most importantly of all, these industries need to stress the improvements in practices that are occurring or the changes that are being made to allow for higher standards of animal care and a higher quality of life. Increasing the awareness of Canadians as to what they are consuming is viewed as positive for society. Assessment of consumer desires would greatly aid in establishing the direction of change and improvement in Canadian agricultural practices. This would allow agricultural industries to become conscious of new demands or trends and to work toward increasing production in particular areas and/or improving standards in another area.

One of the major areas in which consumers in Canada have expressed a desire for improvement is in the welfare of the animals raised to produce meat and animal by-products. However, changes in this area must be made clear to consumers in order to stress the value of improved products. The public must first be made aware of general farm practices and industry standards. They must understand the usual conditions and care that are provided to animals in various production industries. Only then can an increase in standards be recognized and applauded by consumers. And only then will an increase in product cost be accepted (Broom, 2010). It is not unreasonable for consumers to pay more for a product that costs more to produce due to producers making changes on-farm to improve animal welfare. Most individuals

recognize this and will choose how important animal welfare is to them on an individual basis relative to the cost of a product.

Clearly, a labelling program would be of much use to consumers in an already crowded and vast supermarket setting. Most people are overwhelmed by the product availability at their local grocery store and will not understand any differences between meat and animal by-products unless these differences are clearly marked, perhaps with accompanying signage. A labelling program that utilizes only three or four differently coloured labels will be easily understood by most consumers. Educating the public on how each label classifies a product with respect to animal welfare and product quality will ensure that consumers select the product that they may ethically support at a reasonable cost. Additional resources on animal welfare-friendly labelling should be available through a website with clear definitions of each label with respect to each animal practice. It would be beneficial, upon introduction of this system, to provide a simplified version of this information via brochures at the grocery stores where these products will be available.

Finally, there is one other essential area in which Canadians must participate. This is, of course, the selecting of representatives to sit on the animal welfare committees. It is important that members of the general public have a voice as to what is desirable and required by consumers with respect to product quality and industry animal welfare standards. Although consumers may have somewhat unreasonable expectations of production, it will still aid in decision-making and policy development to have input from the general population.

Global Export Market

Canada is already a major contributor to the export market of agricultural products, with agri-food and seafood exports to the European Union alone estimated at \$2.4 billion in 2009 (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada). However, there are areas within this market that Canada is not exploiting. In particular, the niche market of animal welfare friendly products. There has been an increase in demand for these products in many countries over the last decade. The supply in many of these nations can no longer meet the demand, creating the need for increased importation of such products. Canada, then, with its vast resources, space, and ideal farmland, certainly possesses the potential to meet this demand.

Improving the animal welfare on-farm tends to consequently improve the overall quality of products. As a result, these products can be sold for a greater profit. The introduction of government supported national/provincial animal welfare policy, legislation, and a labelling program would ensure that these products meet a particular standard. Standards will be laid out in an easy to understand manner, with requirements at each level for each species under each category clearly explained. These standards, being fully transparent, can then be widely promoted to trading partners, potentially increasing the amount of products that a country wishes to import from Canada. By continuing to improve and reassess standards over time, Canada will remain a world leader in global animal welfare standards.

The Big Picture

The introduction of an Animal Welfare-Friendly Foods label would be an important step toward improving animal welfare in Canada. The structure of such a program would involve contributions from policy developers/analysts, animal scientists and researchers, commodity organizations, and consumers. Inclusion of this diverse group of people would allow standards at each level to be fair, unbiased, and free of any conflict of interest. In turn, this would result in better acceptance by consumers at a domestic level as well as by trade partners at an international level, potentially resulting in an increase in exports of these products. Furthermore, breaking down the level of policy development, research, and enforcement of such standards would aid in ensuring farm compliance across the country. Perhaps most importantly of all, the animals raised in these programs, under improved conditions, would enjoy higher standards of care and a better quality of life free of suffering.

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