Doing the Right Things

An animal welfare checklist for your cow-calf operation.

by ***Kindra Gordon***

When most people think about cow-calf operations, they visualize wide-open spaces, green grass, horse and rider, and a beautiful environment. But, the reality is that cow-calf operations are an outdoor production system and conditions are less than idyllic most of the year. Cattle are affected by changing weather conditions, nutrition issues and diseases.

These factors present animal welfare challenges that must be addressed at the cow-calf level, say Kansas State University faculty K.C. Olson and Chris Reinhardt. Olson is an associate professor of cow-calf nutrition and management, and Reinhardt is an associate professor and Extension feedlot specialist.

As animal welfare becomes an increasingly notable issue among the public, Olson and Reinhardt suggest there are several areas that cow-calf producers must consider with respect to animal welfare. Many of these management areas involve things that cow-calf producers are already doing — but simply require better communication with the public as to how and why they are being done.

Veterinarian and stockmanship expert Tom Noffsinger says it boils down to doing the right things — at all times. He suggests that livestock caregivers should approach their interactions with and handling of animals as if someone were following them with a video camera. Noffsinger says, "This industry has a foundation in integrity and character and we need to build on that."

So, what are the "right things" when it comes to animal welfare? Here's a checklist to consider.

✓ **Nutrition and grazing management:** Keeping livestock well-fed and at an appropriate body condition is a key animal welfare component. "Sub-par or malnutrition can occur when stocking rates are too heavy or too light. Both situations result in poor diet quality," Olson says. He explains that when overgrazed, a plant only offers basal stems with

Using science to measure animal welfare

Demonstrating and communicating animal welfare practices is becoming increasingly important as the topic becomes a trade issue — particularly in Europe, where several mandates are already in place. It is also a movement that is gaining momentum with many international trading partners such as Japan, China, Korea and Brazil.

To that end, Jeffrey Rushen provided an overview of the importance for scientific assessment of animal welfare to participants at the International Symposium on Beef Cattle Welfare May 20, 2010, on the campus of Kansas State University. Rushen is a researcher in dairy cattle welfare at the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Research Centre in Agassiz, British Columbia, and an adjunct professor in the Animal Welfare Program at the University of British Columbia and the University of Laval in Quebec.

Rushen explained that many like to downplay the high animal care standards in Europe, saying they are based on emotion rather than science. But Rushen says the Europeans are starting to build a very formal system of regulations based on science.

For that reason, Rushen says a risk assessment approach to animal welfare is becoming increasingly important. He defined risk assessment as a generally accepted, repeatable, transparent and validated measurement.

Rushen says, "It's a myth that pain cannot be measured in animals. Studies show us that pain control can be measured using anesthetics and analgesics."

He adds, "Can we judge the emotions of animals? People are starting to do this."

Noting this, Rushen encouraged the beef industry to solve animal welfare problems while it has time to do so. He notes that consumers still perceive the cow-calf industry as fairly favorable with the image of cows on green grass. But he states that issues like indoor housing, muddy pens, transportation and pain of dehorning/castration need to be addressed.

Rushen notes, "There is a broad agreement on many of the animal welfare practices; it's just that different terms are being used."

He also suggests that future science should start measuring the "positive" things animals experience on farms. He says, "As scientists we've been good with science to measure pain, disease, stress. I think people would feel more comfortable knowing about animals' play behavior and positive social relationships between animals."

Rushen concludes, "I think this is one of the directions that animal welfare needs to move — it's not all bad; there is some positive interaction too." HW

little nutritive quality, and, conversely, when a plant is allowed to reach reproductive maturity (i.e. a seedhead), the nutritive quality is also low. Thus, Olson says, "A moderate stocking rate allows diet quality to remain high."

✓ **Appropriate calving season:** Also, from an animal welfare consideration, Olson suggests scheduling the calving season so that calving and lactation coincide with peak forage quality may be more beneficial to the animals for calf survival rates and for nutrition for the cow — while also allowing for savings in feed costs.

✓ **Weaning management:** Olson adds, "August weaning rather than October allows cows to restore body condition going into the winter months. Early weaning can be a critical animal welfare intervention especially in times of drought. The science says early weaned calves are equally as healthy and in some cases more healthy."

✓ **Genetics:** Olson explains that this aspect of "animal welfare" means matching the biological type of the cow to the environment. "A larger mature cow size increases nutrient requirements which increases maintenance costs — and can also result in bigger calves and more calving difficulty."

He gives the example of switching mature cow size from 1,350 lb. to 1,200 lb. For a 400-head herd, that's 60,000 lb. less body weight, which means less feed, less cost, smaller calves born at birth and the potential for greater cow longevity.

✓ **Health protocols:** Reinhardt emphasizes that good animal health begins with the cow-calf producer preparing calves for the weaning process and trying to reduce stress. "Preconditioning is becoming an obligation," he says.

Reinhardt identifies timely castration and dehorning, as well as vaccinations and 15 days of backgrounding, as important animal care practices prior to shipping calves.

✓ **Low-stress handling:** With regard to animal care and handling, Noffsinger says, "The more we understand about animal interactions, the more we can move forward and be effective." He advocates avoiding human voice around cattle, saying, "Cattle live where it's quiet; they are not a verbally based species. So understanding this is a place to start."

Noffsinger adds, "Understand that your distance, angles, direction and the speed with which you respond to what an animal is doing impact how they will move." He believes there should be no need for a driving aid of any kind. Along with this, he says, "Always put yourself in a situation where animals can see you. Go to the front of animals so they can see you and they can see where you want them to go."

As a final animal welfare tip, Noffsinger advises getting animals acclimated to facilities. He says, "Some Saturday run your heifers through your facility two or three times before you ever work them. It all takes preparation. When it's time for cattle to be processed, it's not a negative experience if they already know the facilities."

✓ **Timely culling:** Reinhardt says the state of health of cull bulls and cows should be considered before shipping. As a rule of thumb, Jennifer Woods, a livestock handling specialist from Blackie, Alberta, says, "The question is not 'Can the animal walk on the trailer?' It needs to be 'Is the animal going to be able to walk off the trailer?'"

She adds, "The transport of compromised animals is one of the most vulnerable issues for our industry because it is so visible."

She points out that transportation stressors to animals include handling, mixing, fatigue, environmental, and time off feed and water. "A normal healthy animal can handle these stresses; a compromised animal (lame, diseased, low body condition score) cannot."

Bottom line, Woods says, "If you wouldn't eat the animal, don't ship it and expect other people to."

All total, Reinhardt concludes, "Animal welfare starts with nutrition, and then it is really about decision making — when to calve, wean, market and what genetics to use. Along with those decisions, producers need to consider the weather — we can't control it, but we can manage and be prepared and make different decisions. We need to ask ourselves if we are causing some of our own problems with the choices we've made." **HW**

Editor's Note: *This article highlights comments provided by speakers at the International Symposium on Beef Cattle Welfare held in May 2010 on the campus of Kansas State University. For more information about animal care, access the online training center initiated by K-State at* www.animalcaretraining.com. *The site offers 200 modules in Spanish and English on beef, dairy and equine animal care, behavior and handling topics. Eight of the modules are specifically designed as training for livestock auction market employees with a test at the end.*