



Animal Welfare Focus Continues

JBS, Tyson are implementing their own welfare programs.

by Kindra Gordon

Meatpacking heavyweights JBS and Tyson are stepping up their standards for animal welfare. Both are designing their own programs with standards and auditing processes that go beyond the welfare standards set by the U.S. government.

The government sets welfare standards for packing plants through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the meatpacking industry also provides guidelines, primarily through the American Meat Institute (AMI).

While JBS and Tyson will still meet those standards, the new programs they are designing will exceed them. Many speculate the new programs are an effort to better earn consumers' support for attention to animal welfare concerns.

"The company [JBS] has its own expectations and is working to build, support and maintain a culture of animal welfare among all its employees," stated Lily Edwards-Callaway at the Academy of Veterinary Consultants conference held this spring in Oklahoma. Callaway oversees JBS animal welfare programs and outlined the company's evolving efforts to enhance welfare practices — both at JBS plants and within the meatpacker's supply chains — at the recent conference.

Most notably, the JBS company has implemented a systematic approach toward

humane handling and slaughter, incorporating nearly continuous audits of all live-animal processes within its plants. For some of the audits, technical services specialists routinely observe and document animal-handling activities. For other audits, JBS uses remote video cameras monitoring all activities from the time cattle trucks arrive through slaughter.

Callaway and her crew can watch activities at any of those points on monitors in a viewing room. Video screens positioned in common areas in the company's corporate offices allow company executives and staff to see how plant crews handle animals at all times.

In addition, a third-party audit company called Arrowsight can monitor the same cameras remotely and conduct random audits.

Callaway receives daily technical services reports from every JBS plant, including scores for all live-animal activities, and she holds weekly meetings to review the reports. Graphs based on the scores allow her to track trends and intervene early if problems begin to appear in a particular area of a plant.

Callaway says the company uses the videos primarily for training. If an employee is seen violating protocols, the staff can view the videos with the employee, explaining what he did wrong and how to correct it.

Since the company began using video cameras two years ago, she reports, there has been a steady

reduction in the use of electric prods along with improvements in effective stunning and other measures of animal welfare.

JBS also has begun working backward into its supply chain to coordinate animal welfare activities at the production stage, particularly with its Five Rivers Cattle Feeding subsidiary. JBS also is engaged in a pilot project that monitors pig suppliers and documents animal welfare practices.

During her remarks, Callaway expressed her belief that eventually retailers and consumers will drive a trend toward documentation of welfare practices at every production stage.

Tyson unveils FarmCheck

Similarly, Tyson Foods has introduced FarmCheck, a new audit program designed to help ensure responsible on-farm treatment of animals. During the Cattle Industry Convention in Tampa, Fla., the Freedom to Operate Committee received a detailed explanation of this program from Dean Danilson, Tyson Foods' vice president of food safety and quality control.

Danilson explained this is a program designed to personally audit the treatment of animals at the livestock and poultry farms that supply the company.

He noted that consumers are concerned about the quality of their food, the proper use of antibiotics, the use of hormones, the sustainability of production practices and the welfare of

animals in the production process. In response Tyson has designed FarmCheck because the company wants its customers to know that it cares enough to check on the farm to see how animals are raised.

Tyson announced its plans for FarmCheck in October 2012. Tyson currently works with more than 12,000 independent livestock and poultry farmers. This number includes 5,000 family poultry farmers, 3,000 family hog farmers and 4,000 family cattle farmers. The company has maintained an Office of Animal Well-being since 2000.

In a news release announcing the FarmCheck program, Donnie Smith, president and CEO of Tyson Foods, said, "We believe the farmers who supply us are the best in the world and I think the audits will verify this. But if we find problems, we want them fixed right away."

The FarmCheck program has four main components: animal well-being farm audits, animal well-being research, an animal well-being advisory panel and internal management structure.

The FarmCheck audits have already begun on a trial basis on some of the 3,000 independent hog farms that supply the company. Auditors are visiting the farms to check on such things as animal access to food and water, as well as proper human-animal interaction and worker training.

Danilson noted that the education and training of workers doing the day-to-day work with the animals is what the industry has got to improve upon.

Although Tyson personnel have been conducting the audits so far, the company plans to ultimately involve independent, third-party auditors. It also intends to expand the program to include chicken and cattle farms by January 2014. The audits are being developed by experienced veterinarians and animal welfare experts and are expected to include measures that build upon current voluntary farm industry programs.

Audience members questioned Danilson about the cost of such an auditing program and reasons why the industry's Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program is not adequate to provide the same assurances Tyson hopes to achieve through FarmCheck. He essentially responded that Tyson wants the animals to be treated according to the guidelines it sets, and said, "We want them [their suppliers] to follow our rules."

Danilson was asked if FarmCheck is being created in response to pressure from animal activist groups. He acknowledged that groups like the Humane Society of the United States "are a voice." When asked if he considers them a credible voice, Danilson said, "I won't go there." **HW**