

Cattle feeders get proactive with new feedlot animal welfare audit

Rather than wait and see multiple audits imposed by packers and retailers, the National Cattle Feeders Association developed an easy-to-use tool

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Last April, the Vancouver-based Earls restaurant chain announced it would no longer source its beef from Canada, opting instead for 'Certified Humane' beef sourced from the United States. Though pressure from customers loyal to Canadian beef eventually forced the chain to reverse the decision, those most in the know — the feedlot associations and meat processors who are receiving increasing pressure from retailers for proof of humane production practices — know Earls' move was just the tip of the iceberg.

Realizing animal welfare audits would be foisted upon them if they didn't act first, the National Cattle Feeders Association (NCFA) is stepping boldly forward with North America's first-ever beef cattle welfare audit tool.

"Animal welfare is a big concern for consumers today," said Dr. Joyce Van Donkersgoed, a Calgary-based feedlot veterinarian and NCFA's audit program co-ordinator.

"They want assurances that the meat they eat was raised humanely and with care. The beef industry is a linked chain — when consumers put pressure on the retailers, the retailers push that pressure back to the meat packers, and the meat packers have to push it back along the chain to the feedlots."

More than two years ago, a packer approached the NCFA with a draft animal welfare affidavit it hoped to implement. The affidavit required feedlot operators to sign off that they complied with a variety of animal care practices, both at the feedlot and during transportation. Though the affidavit only required a signature from the operator as proof, NCFA officials



The vast majority of Canadian feedlots is doing an excellent job when it comes to animal welfare, says Dr. Joyce Van Donkersgoed, who helped create the new audit tool. PHOTO: SUPPLIED

presumed demands for a more formal verification wouldn't be far behind. Further, they guessed other packers would soon be coming to them with similar demands.

"Our big fear was that various packers and retailers would all create their own, separate audits, which would be chaos: completely impossible and unmanageable for feedlot operators," said Van Donkersgoed. "So our goal was to create a single audit tool that would satisfy all meat packers and retailers while minimizing cost and administrative burden to feedlots."

Through much of 2015, the NCFA worked with Canada's three major beef packers, as well as animal scientists, feedlot veterinarians, feedlot producers and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to create the early draft of an audit program. Together, they turned the

Canadian Beef Code of Practice (released in 2013 by the National Farm Animal Care Council) into a single, workable, comprehensive audit tool. They then presented the draft tool to a wide cross-section of retailers and piloted it at 22 feedyards in order to further perfect it.

This past spring, the committee rolled out the final result: the brand new Canadian Feedlot Animal Care Assessment Program.

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DR. JOYCE VAN DONKERSGOED

zation (the international standard for animal audits) and Canada's National Farm Animal Care Council, the program is comprehensive, reputable, and — equally importantly — user friendly.

Throughout this past summer, the NCFA worked to develop templates, communication tools, and an online certification program to educate producers and ensure uptake of the audit tool went smoothly. All of these resources will soon be available online.

For now, the program is a vol-

untary 'tool.' That said, retailers are very likely to start demanding mandatory animal welfare audits in the near future. As such, the NCFA is pushing hard to educate cattle feed yards about the program and enrol them now.

While few feedlot managers will be excited about jumping through new auditing and administrative hoops, the audit is designed to be as simple to use and low maintenance as possible. All requirements are listed in easy checklist style, and all necessary documentation is available in template, fill-in-the-box form.

"Because this program comes from within the industry rather than being pushed on us from outside, it has been designed with the end-user — the feedlot operator — in mind," said Van Donkersgoed. "We've done everything possible to make this as easy as possible to implement."

The vast majority of feedlots is doing an excellent job, she added, and most will only have to make minor changes to meet the audit's requirements.

Van Donkersgoed views the audit as an opportunity rather than a burden.

"Some feedlots, especially the smaller ones that are used to just talking procedures around the kitchen table, are going to have to focus more on documentation," she said. "A few feedlots might need to tweak certain procedures or details. In general, this audit showcases the good work feedlots are already doing."

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Thursday, September 29th
Sponsor: ATB / Inter Pipeline
ATB - Smoky Lake
50 Wheatland Avenue
12:00PM-3:00PM

BOYLE

Thursday, October 6th
Sponsor: ATB / Inter Pipeline
ATB - Boyle
5115 3 Street, Boyle
2:00PM-5:00PM

WAINWRIGHT

Friday, September 30th
Sponsor: ATB / Inter Pipeline
ATB - Wainwright
509 10 Street
1:00PM-4:00PM

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Friday, October 7th
Sponsor: ATB / Inter Pipeline
ATB - Sherwood Park
100 - 550 Baseline Road
2:00PM-5:00PM

VERMILION

Saturday, October 1st
Sponsor: Inter Pipeline
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5320 50 Ave
11:00AM-2:00PM

STANDARD

Wednesday, October 12th
Sponsor: ATB / Inter Pipeline
ATB - Standard
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10:00AM-1:00PM

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