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Livestock care progress linked to economic opportunities

Calgary, Alta., March 28, 2006: The livestock industry in Alberta and across Canada has helped to strengthen its economic future by championing responsible animal care at a time of rising global expectations for high animal welfare standards.

That was the overall message delivered by a range of animal care experts and industry leaders, who spoke at the Livestock Care Conference, hosted by Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC), in Red Deer, March 24. AFAC is a partnership of Alberta's major livestock groups, with a mandate to promote responsible, humane animal care within the livestock industry.

"The Alberta livestock industry often sets the standard for the rest of the country," noted Dr. David Fraser of the University of British Columbia, who kicked off the Conference with a presentation on the global perspective. "The progress here could be emulated anywhere in the world, to the great benefit of livestock producers and their animals."

The progress both provincially and nationally could not come at a more important time, says Fraser, an internationally renowned expert and Chair of UBC's Animal Welfare Department. "The change in public attitude toward animal welfare has led to profound changes in social policy worldwide, and agriculture, as by far the world's largest user of animals, has been at the focus of a lot of these changes."

Major examples of recent global initiatives include the European Commission's new Animal Welfare Action Plan, the new World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the European Union's new Welfare Quality Project. Even Asia is getting into the act, with China – by far the world's largest pork producer – showing an interest in higher standards to facilitate broader trade.

Fraser, who has consulted on these and other such initiatives, recently received a discussion document from the International Finance Corporation, the investment arm of the World Bank. "When the World Bank becomes involved as an agent of change in animal welfare, we realize that we've entered a different world."

Managing the expectations of this new world at the production level is a major challenge, say Dr. Jeff Rushen and Dr. Anne Marie de Passillé, who also spoke at the Conference. Both are animal welfare researchers with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, who have experience delivering training programs to improve animal care and handling.

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The researchers believe flexible, animal-based standards that assess the state of the animals are needed rather than prescriptive conditions. In a paper for the OIE, they have also called for a smoother integration of animal welfare and food safety standards.

Attaining these goals will take some hard work initially, but have potential to pay off not only in terms of animal welfare benefits but also for the economic strength of the livestock industry. “On the production end, there’s a danger in becoming fixated on the negative consequences of animal welfare – we think it’s going to cost us more, that there will be legislation and regulations and all these difficult things,” says Rushen. “But many improvements to animal welfare can be cost effective. I think there are actually going to be a lot of benefits, including economic benefits.”

Another key benefit at the production level will be lessening the human emotional toll of dealing with difficult animal distress situations, says Dr. Claude Mason, a veterinarian in various mixed large animal practices in Manitoba for over 15 years.

In a presentation on training for basic livestock care, handling and humane euthanasia, Mason joined Rushen and de Passillé in emphasizing the critical need for training and support of workers. “Training, procedures and empowerment are all essential to help these people assess situations and do what’s right for the animal,” says Mason.

Overall, strong communications by AFAC, other provincial farm animal care groups and the new National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) are critical to continued progress, says David Hyink, a poultry farmer and Chair of AFAC. “Seeing our highest attendance yet at this Conference, along with the progress in Alberta and across Canada, it’s very gratifying to see how far we’ve come and the opportunities that further progress will bring.”

The Livestock Care Conference drew more than 170 livestock industry participants. More information is available at www.afac.ab.ca.

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