

*For immediate release:*

## **Livestock Care Conference puts spotlight on progress, fresh thinking**

**Calgary, Alta., March 27, 2007:** Fresh ideas and perspectives to drive continued progress for Alberta's livestock industry in supporting animal care were the focus of the Livestock Care Conference, March 23, in Red Deer, hosted by Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC). AFAC is a partnership of Alberta's major livestock groups, with a mandate to promote responsible, humane animal care within the livestock industry.

The conference kicked off with a presentation on how animal welfare should be viewed not only on the basis of science, but as a combination of science and ethics. This was delivered by Dr. Ray Stricklin of the University of Maryland animal science department, who has been involved with animal welfare related teaching, research and policy activities for over 25 years.

“There is an argument that science alone should be the basis of dealing with animal welfare, but I disagree,” says Stricklin. “As a livestock industry, we want to do what is right for the animals, for the environment and for the public at large. In that sense, science and ethics should always overlap and we should not give up the moral high ground to critics of the industry by focusing on science alone. We care about our animals and we care about doing the right thing – that’s what ethics is all about.”

Providing an international perspective on how livestock industries are responding to new expectations for animal care was Dr. Joe Stookey of the Western College of Veterinary Medicine, who shared his recent observations of animal welfare practices, industry programs and Codes of Welfare in New Zealand.

“New Zealand has 39 million sheep, 9.6 million cattle and just 4 million people, all in an area 2.5 times smaller than Saskatchewan,” says Stookey. “They also have a tourism industry that generates \$5.9 billion annually. As a result, they are very good at implementing programs and practices that place them in a positive light from a global viewpoint.”

An update on how research is leading toward improvements for assessing animal welfare at the on-farm level was delivered by Dr. Tina Widowski of the University of Guelph, a leading animal behaviour and welfare researcher. Widowski’s current research focuses on how housing and management practices affect the physiology, behaviour and welfare of pigs, poultry and cattle.

“When we perform on farm assessments, we can’t use the expensive or time consuming techniques we use in a research setting, so the focus is on developing more practical approaches,” says Widowski. “One of the things we’re learning is that measures of human factors, such as quality of handling, daily care and technical skills are some of the most important indicators for animal welfare.”

A perspective on the growing need for on-farm audits and certification was offered by Earl Dotson, CEO of Validus Services, an Iowa-based company that specializes in third-party certification for farmers and food companies.

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“Fifty years ago the average consumer in North America had a direct connection to agriculture, but today the vast majority are at least three generations removed from the farm,” says Dotson. “This brings a new level of challenges as consumers want assurances their food is safe and comes from animals that have been well looked after. We need to provide those assurances and to have our ‘30 second elevator speech’ ready to explain how we’re doing that.”

Helping Alberta’s livestock industry succeed in this challenging environment is core part of the role of AFAC, an organization that has championed livestock care in Alberta through numerous industry-driven initiatives over the past 13 years, says AFAC Manager Susan Church. Church and Dr. Derek Haley of Alberta Agriculture and Food presented an overview of progress with AFAC and the new Alberta Livestock Welfare Framework.

“Alberta livestock producers are dedicated to responsible animal care and have made a lot of progress to ensure they remain leaders in this area,” says Church. “We see AFAC as a key ‘risk management tool’ to help them keep up with developments and respond to new challenges. The new welfare framework is a leading example of recent progress with this approach.”

The conference agenda wrapped up with a talk on communication strategies by Jeff Goodwin, Director for 4-H and Youth Development at Colorado State University. “Most people are middle of the road and understand common sense when it comes to the use of animals,” says Goodwin. “As a livestock industry, we need to use this common sense as our guide and do a good job of telling our story. We are all connected in supporting the well being of animals.”

The Livestock Care Conference drew 145 livestock industry participants. More information is available at [www.afac.ab.ca](http://www.afac.ab.ca).

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For more information, contact:

For more information contact:  
Susan Church, Manager  
Alberta Farm Animal Care Association (AFAC)  
Phone: (403) 932-8050  
[info@afac.ab.ca](mailto:info@afac.ab.ca)