



*For immediate release:*

## **Milestone Livestock Care Conference builds on 15 years of AFAC progress**

**Calgary, Alta., March 31, 2009:** Building on years of industry-driven farm animal welfare progress in Alberta and beyond was the focus of the Livestock Care Conference, March 27 in Red Deer, Alta, which featured leading speakers on the latest developments, issues and science in livestock care.

This year's conference signaled a major milestone and transition year for the host organization Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC), established 15 years ago as a partnership of Alberta's major livestock groups, with a mandate to promote responsible, humane farm animal care. AFAC members have worked together to build a framework for continual improvement in handling, transport, research, education and other areas.

"We have come a long way over 15 years," says Doug Sawyer, a beef producer and AFAC Chairman, addressing the more than 140 livestock producers, students and other industry representatives in attendance. "The continued strong turnout at this conference shows how important it is to all of us, from all the different livestock groups and all the parts of our industries up and down the chain, to continue moving forward on farm animal care issues. That's what we plan to do."

Lead-off program speaker Dr. Gail Golab of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) provided an inside view of how that organization has now formally placed animal welfare as one of its highest priorities and is jumping into the fray of key debates. "We realize we have sat by the sidelines for too long," says Golab. "With the increasing public focus on welfare issues, this became 'the big dog in the room.' It was not a new topic, but it was something we hadn't addressed as an isolated priority or policy area."

AVMA is now developing recommendations for complex issues that are practical and resonate in the court of public opinion, such as the recent debate surrounding Proposition 2 in California. In doing so, it is often providing a more in-depth "whole picture" viewpoint on controversial issues such as sow stalls and laying hen housing.

On the science-based innovation front, Dr. Dan Weary of the University of British Columbia Livestock Welfare Program discussed opportunities for innovations that include "asking the animals" to determine improved practices. For example, Weary showed a video of an experiment where dairy cows selected their own sleeping / feeding areas, choosing among differences in bedding materials and other elements. "You can ask the cows. They vote with their feet," he noted.

The challenge of livestock welfare issues is balancing science, consumer perceptions and the animal, says Weary. "My belief is the best approach is for the sciences to provide solutions that producers want to use willingly. All programs, including good-intentioned programs in response to public perceptions, must consider the animal first and foremost to be effective."

Attitude and ownership are other critical components of getting any new approach implemented effectively, particularly at the regulatory level, emphasized Dr. Anne Allen of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), who discussed the challenges faced in delivering consistent animal care at Canada's meat plants. "What you want is ownership from the people on the ground – the stockmen and managers," says Allen, who along with colleagues has sought to redefine the typical regulator role. "Encouraging them to participate in developing the solutions results in better approaches and stronger buy-in."

Jennifer Woods provided an overview of the American Meat Institute's recently developed livestock transport audits for unloading at meat plants, she discussed the benefits and issues driving this approach and the impact on Canada. "We as an industry need to enforce good practices and continually work together to have everybody on the same page."

Presentations also offered recent case studies involving pigeon and horse welfare that benefited from fast response by the livestock industry. For example, Crystal Mackay, Executive Director for the Ontario Farm Animal Council (OFAC), provided a play-by-play of how OFAC members aided in averting poultry health threats and supporting pigeon welfare during a pigeon industry bankruptcy crisis. "Even when these incidents do not appear to affect us directly, often there is a connection at some level," she says. "These incidents are also opportunities to learn and improve our preparedness."

The conference also offered fresh perspective on how to approach conflicts with aggressive opponents of livestock agriculture. Matt Sutton-Vermeulen, a consultant specialized in issues management, noted the pitfalls of typical confrontational styles. "Speak to the reasonable majority rather than an antagonist on one end of the spectrum," he says. "Don't get drawn into a fight you can't win."

Adding to the milestone nature of this year's conference was its status as the last under the guidance of AFAC Manager Susan Church, who has served in that role since the organization's inception and is retiring this spring. The day rounded out with an overview presentation by Church on "AFAC: The first 15 years and the future," which outlined key progress to date and core elements of AFAC's recently updated strategic plan.

"It's our job to continue to ensure that animal welfare continues to evolve with our industry," says Church. "We have a great strategic plan in place, forward-thinking producers who have driven a new generation of livestock management, and we are in a better position than ever to capitalize on a market aware of animal care."

More information on AFAC including additional articles on the Livestock Care Conference presentations is available at [www.afac.ab.ca](http://www.afac.ab.ca).

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