

Alberta's livestock industries take charge on housing

Alberta's livestock industries are taking strong steps to lead, innovate and manage rising expectations around the increasingly high-profile issue of animal housing, with an aim to support a "Home Sweet Home" for livestock that optimizes welfare and production priorities.

Advancing livestock welfare

Insights and developments were discussed at the recent AFAC Advisory Council session in Red Deer. "There are vast differences between livestock species and the unique challenges faced by different sectors with respect to housing," says Brent Bushell of the Western Hog Exchange who chaired the session. "Yet all share a common goal of supporting a high level of care and welfare for the animals while continually improving based on new knowledge and opportunities."

Egg industry progress

In the egg industry, operations have made strong progress in shifting away from conventional housing toward alternative 'furnished' and loose housing options, which provide more space and allowance for expression of natural behaviours, says Christina Robinson, Farm Production Manager with Egg Farmers of Alberta. The sector faces further challenges related to market issues and ongoing retailer demands such as the increase in customers pushing a cage-free agenda, with a bottom line that uncertainty on housing and related sustainability issues continues. "One thing we know for sure is that as the future unfolds, our farmers will continue to work to provide what the market demands and to provide choice to consumers. They will also continue to learn and implement improved management strategies to support the new systems demanded."

Swine sector meeting the challenge

For the swine industry, among the most high-profile issues has been sow housing, with trends now pointing toward a total phase out of sow gestation crates by 2022. The industry has made solid gains in shifting to new housing systems for all aspects of pig production, however an ongoing challenge is the cost burden, says Javier Bahamon, Quality Assurance and Production Manager with Alberta Pork. "The big question is 'Who pays?' Demands are coming from retailers, consumers and government. It's difficult if the cost burden is placed too heavily on the producers alone. But our industry is committed to leadership and working with stakeholders, to take the right path forward."

Proactive approach for dairy

Change has also been a constant for the dairy industry, which has taken charge of housing innovation along with broader welfare and sustainability issues through its national proAction initiative. “Consumers today are not only interested in the quality of our products but also how they are produced – and they want to have a vote in that,” says Dr. Herman Barkema of the University of Calgary Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. “This is simply the new reality – a fact of life for all livestock industries. In the dairy industry, we believe we need to be proactive in addressing all of these issues. We are much better off when we take the lead.”

Championing equine welfare

Horse housing, which includes addressing diverse equine environments spanning hobby use, recreation, performance, working farm purposes and feedlots, is continually advancing with improvements in areas such as housing design, ventilation, tie stalls and outdoor shelters, says veteran horse industry advocate Les Burwash. However, an ongoing challenge is managing public expectations, as horses in farm fields and acreages are often highly visible to passersby who may not understand housing requirements. “A hurdle all of us face as livestock sectors is anthropomorphism, whereby the public place human attributes and needs on the animals or think of them more like domestic pets. There’s a big knowledge gap. It’s important we keep making progress to reach out and improve public understanding.”

Progress in diverse areas

The Advisory Council session also featured talks on housing systems for beef cattle, by Dr. Karen Schwartzkopf-Genswein of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada; for broilers by producer Byron Ference; for bison by Linda Sautner of Bison Producers of Alberta; for goats by Laurie Fries of the Alberta Goat Association and Patrick Bos of Rock Ridge Dairy; and for sheep by Lakeland College students Amy McCormack, Larissa Woodrow, Madison Holgate and Kayla Clarke. It also included a large group discussion focused on thoughts and ideas toward further advancement.

Join the discussion

AFAC Advisory Council sessions are held regularly throughout the year (typically every two- to three-months) with an aim to support discussion and debate, information sharing and idea generation. The sessions are open to AFAC member organizations and their members. Additional groups who want to participate in the discussions can do so by becoming a member of AFAC. [Contact AFAC](#) to learn more.