

What's the future for farm animal well-being?

The experts discuss at Boehringer Ingelheim Expert Forum



With scrutiny at an all-time high, experts discuss the future of farm animal well-being at Boehringer Ingelheim forum. Ensuring the well-being of farm animals across the globe requires a common understanding of what well-being actually means, and a realistic assessment of practices in different markets, and the application of objective measures. This is what the audience heard at the 11th Boehringer Ingelheim Expert Forum on Farm Animal Well-being, held in Australia in June.

Experts including over 100 veterinarians, scientists and welfare specialists from 10 countries participated in the Forum on Farm Animal Well Being, the first time the event had been staged in the Southern hemisphere. The forum brings together veterinarians, producers, industry advocates and retailers to discuss the latest insights, challenges and opportunities to improve the lives for billions of animals that supply our meat, wool and dairy products.

This year's event focused on the relationship between animal well-being and international trade. The discussion centered around how to recognise and measure well-being, and what this means for introducing standards in a global market where the appetite and capacity for change is highly variable.

Scrutiny at an all-time high

Understanding animal well-being from the animal's perspective and identifying the difference between 'wants' and 'needs' is the challenge that speakers discussed. Through this understanding, practitioners can then develop measures which bring objectivity to what can be an otherwise emotionally charged discussion. There was broad agreement that a multidisciplinary approach is essential, with researchers and vets working closely with frontline staff to care for animals, as well as connecting with industry bodies and policy-makers.

Professor Andrew Fisher, from Australia's Animal Welfare Science Centre at the University of Melbourne, says scrutiny of well-being practices is at an all-time high. "Welfare is better than ever, but if you ask a random person on the street if animal welfare is better than it was 20 years ago, a lot of them would probably say no" he said. He added that part of the challenge is that it can be difficult



to recognise the difference between practice that is poor and practice that is just different. "Where practices are different they can sometimes look wrong. The answer is to measure the animals' welfare – we need to shift from resource-based measures to animal-based measures."

Professor Natalie Waran from the Eastern Institute of Technology in New Zealand agreed that it's time to move to animal-based measures, including measures that assess overall quality of life and not just 'moment in time' snapshots. "Positive welfare is best assessed by understanding what the animal values" she said, outlining some of the latest research methods to assess what is known as 'elasticity of demand' allowing researchers to differentiate between an animal's wants and needs. For example, food is generally inelastic whereas species preferences over pen or cage size are often elastic and dependent upon many factors, including previous experience.

The critical role of humans

Dr David Beggs from the University of Melbourne noted the importance of commonality of interpretation when using qualitative behavioral assessments, and the role of human behaviour in driving

animal response. This theme – human interaction with livestock – was repeated by several speakers. Dr Teresa Collins from Australia's Murdoch University told the conference that the industry could benefit from saying the word "care" more often, reminding stakeholders inside and outside the industry that the people who work with animals don't just manage them – they care for them.

Like many other speakers, Dr Collins' said in her presentation on measurement in the live export sector that the time was now to reconsider what we measure. "Current monitoring includes extensive monitoring around mortality" she said. "Mortality rates have been going down, but perhaps mortality isn't the right or the only measure." Instead, measurements should reflect the physiology and natural behaviours of animals and take a 'whole of life' view. Indicators should integrate with existing reporting requirements, promote evidence-based decisions and, crucially, be easily implemented by stockpersons.

The challenge of change

As the conference considered the question of what to measure, Dr Sara Platto (Jiangnan University, China) reminded the room of the great disparities in practice across markets. Dr Platto asked whether welfare assessment without borders was even a possibility, pointing to challenges many western standards writers probably haven't even considered.

"It's very hard for China and other countries to apply standards developed in a western country. In many Asian countries, legislation is either optional or non-existent and producers are raising entirely different breeds and trying to implement EU or US standards around nutrition and other factors.

The good news, she said, is that while change can be challenging, it is happening. "Animal welfare in China is moving. Vet colleges are starting to recognize the value of welfare, and larger farms value research and practice change. And in China we have so many animals that small changes are big changes."



Developing standards

As many of the speakers explored what to measure and why, Dr Leisha Hewitt from Livestock Welfare in Tasmania, Australia talked the conference through some of the practicalities of developing standards, and the role of private certification schemes. She said that in the UK, up to 99% of production in some livestock sectors is now under a scheme of some sort and that being enrolled in a scheme is now a necessity rather than a competitive advantage.



James Whittaker from Australian supermarket group Coles acknowledged that the sheer volume of schemes and logos could be confusing for the consumer, and that at the same time promoting good welfare practice didn't necessarily lead to strong shifts in consumer behavior. A similar note was sounded by researcher Professor Grahame Coleman from the University of Melbourne, who unveiled research showing that while consumers demand improved welfare practices, it has little impact on what they buy.

While the impact of heightened awareness around well-being has not yet been fully realised at the cash register, Richard Norton from Meat and Livestock Australia said industry was investing strongly in welfare research and supporting best practice. Dr Lindsay Burton from dairy giant Fonterra agreed, noting that expectations are extremely high and that the consumer doesn't care that different factors impact different sectors.

A phased approach to pain relief

Bringing the conversation back to a very practical level, Professor John Campbell from the University of Saskatchewan in Canada talked about the experience in his country, where standards were codified and implemented following extensive industry input. "Producers told us they didn't want a code of practice that everyone was going to ignore. The result was a phased approach," he said. The code, that calls for the use of pain relief during a number of procedures including castration and disbudding of cattle, was developed after a significant research period.

Professor Campbell said animals and their handlers all benefit when proper pain relief is used. "We've seen that when pain relief is used during calf processing, cattle exhibit faster movement and calves reunite better with cows. Once producers start using it they never go back."

Looking ahead

While most of the conference was dedicated to expert speakers, delegates also had the opportunity to get involved in a workshop and consider the drivers and barriers to improved animal well-being in the future. Amid a great deal of discussion, they identified drivers ranging from pride and conscience to market access and risk aversion, while their barriers list included access to data, a lagging educational framework and limited skills.

By the close of the forum, participants were commenting on its value and feeling optimistic about the continued uptake of improved well-being practices across the industry worldwide.

For more information about this forum and past events, visit: www.farmanimalwellbeing.com

