

ANIMAL WELFARE IN THE FEEDLOT

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With each passing year, the animal rights and Animal Welfare Movement is accelerating and becoming more vocal. Animal welfare has become a highly emotional issue that is often debated by people or groups with little or no experience in the cattle industry let alone the feedlot industry. With continuing urbanization, most people have lost the connection with the land and raising of farm animals. Consequently, they do not understand how animals are cared for and what procedures and management decisions that need to be made in caring for farm animals. People now have only companion animals with which to relate and their appreciation of how they see such animals needing to be treated is then transmitted to a perception of how farm animals should also be treated. At the same time, the consumer has demanded the highest quality food at the cheapest possible price. Producers responded to this challenge and intensive animal production and farming systems emerged.

Confinement feeding is much more visible to the general public due to the nature of large groups of animals in a small confined area. This is contrary to the beliefs of a lot of people who believe that animals should only be extensively and “traditionally” raised. These beliefs are reinforced with every negative incident that occurs and receives media publicity, e.g. heat load events and botulism incidents of recent years. Consequently, intensive agriculture needs to actively work to develop production systems that not only improve productivity but which projects an image of a caring and welfare-concerned industry.

WHAT IS WELFARE?

To look at this objectively, the welfare of animals in one’s care has been the producers concern ever since domestication first occurred. The Macquarie dictionary defines welfare as “the state of being well; well being”. It is in the producer’s best interest to ensure that his animals are healthy content and comfortable.

At the most basic level, animal welfare is about avoidance of animal suffering. Not only is this about the provision of good health and nutrition and the prevention of cruelty, but the physical and psychological condition of the animal as well.

In 1983, the Farm Animal Welfare Council in the UK recognized the essential needs of farm animals. These are called the “FIVE FREEDOMS”, which are:

1. Freedom from thirst, hunger or malnutrition
2. Freedom from discomfort
3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease
4. Freedom to express normal behaviour
5. Freedom from fear and distress.

Dr David Mellor developed a graphic depiction of the 5 freedoms, which he calls the five domains of potential welfare compromise (See figure 1).

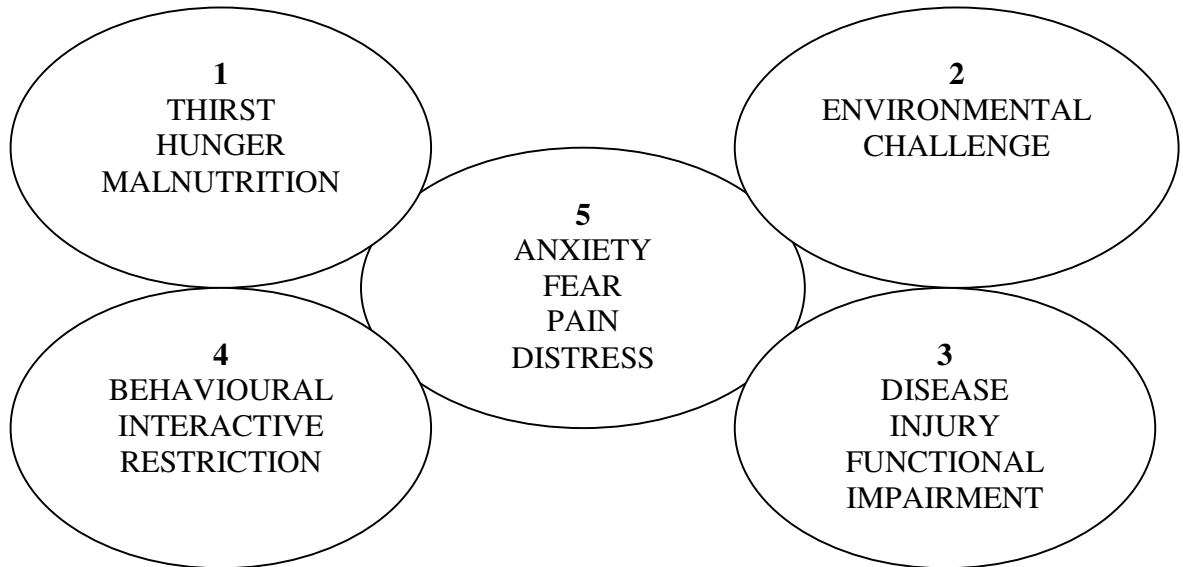


Figure 1 – Five Domains of Potential Welfare Compromise

If these five freedoms are examined, one might conclude that these requirements can be met by good husbandry practices. This may well be so, but the critics of intensive livestock systems argue that the system creates mass “suffering” to the confined animals, because the animals are not in their natural environment and so cannot exhibit their full range of instinctive behaviours.

Science has shown that there is a strong correlation between an animal’s health and situations that cause it to experience fear, anxiety or frustration and that its productivity is also affected both directly and indirectly. Animals will suffer fear and/or anxiety simply due to the way they are handled. The attitude of the stockman towards stock will affect productivity (see figure 2).

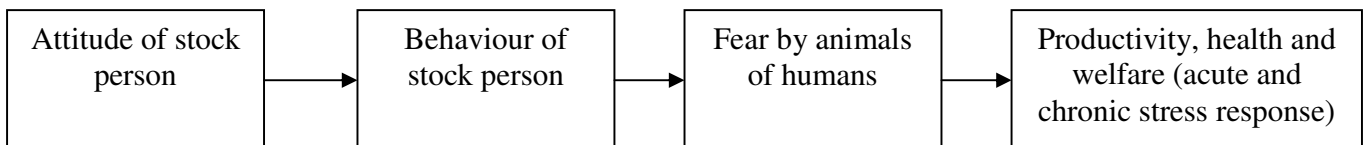


Figure 2 – Chain Reaction Between Stock Person and Animal

STRESS:

Stress has been defined as the mental and physical responses to external stimuli. Prolonged stress (distress) from adverse or negative stimuli results in inappropriate or extreme responses to the detriment of health and performance. The most effective feedlot health programmes are based upon stress management.

What are some of the potential stressors that feedlot cattle have to contend with? There are stressors that occur prior to animals arriving at the feedlot, even if animals are sourced directly from the property on which they were bred. The act of mustering, yarding, drafting, weighing, loading and trucking are all unfamiliar and therefore stressful events. Often cattle may be held prior to trucking without access to good quality feed.

Cattle purchased from sale yards have another set of stressors imposed upon them. These animals are subjected to strange surroundings, lots of noise, people, dogs, goads and prodders, other strange cattle, lots of vehicular movement and protracted periods of no food or water. They are also in all likelihood being mixed with strange cattle. These cattle are then loaded onto another truck and undergo a further trip of sometimes more than 1,000 km before they arrive at the feedlot. These stressors are cumulative and so when these cattle arrive at the feedlot, they can be suffering from quite high levels of stress.

The total time in transit from mustering to feedlot arrival can, in some instances, be more than 1 week.

Once the cattle arrive at the feedlot, they are tired, dehydrated, frightened, thirsty and hungry with reduced rumen function and possibly bruised or injured and disoriented. These animals are unloaded and placed in receival pens with feed of varying quality and water, which may be of different taste and quality. Receival pens are often overcrowded.

Within a few days of arrival, the cattle are processed, worked through yards, co-mingled again and placed in a feeding pen. Here they have to find the water, which may taste very different. There is no grass so they have to find the bunk, which may have no feed in it or it may be filled with some unfamiliar and uninteresting feed.

This is indeed a very stressful period in the animal's life, which can severely compromise the animal's health and welfare.

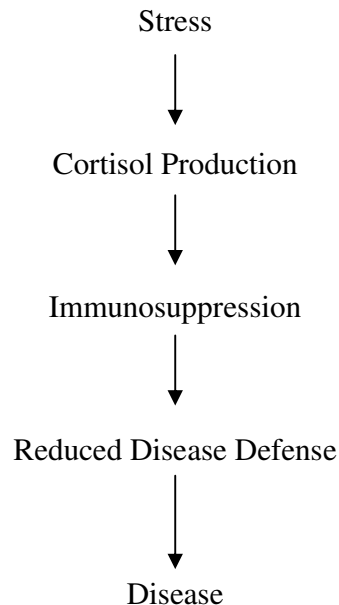
MEASURES OF ANIMAL WELFARE:

Assessing or measuring the welfare status of animals is fraught with danger because often human values have been made to equate to animal values. This is perception and not fact and must always be viewed as such until some objective measurements of stress are developed.

Measure of Poor Welfare:

- Lowered life expectancy
- Behavioural pathology (vice, e.g. body and tail biting, bulling)
- Lowered ability to grow/breed
- Body damage
- Extent of behavioural aversion shown
- Disease
- Immunosuppression
- Extent to which normal physiological and anatomical development are prevented
- Physiological attempts to cope
- Behavioural attempts to cope.

The ability to cope declines as stressors increase.



Measures of Good Welfare:

A variety of normal behaviours are shown:

- Physiological indicators (e.g. normal respiration)
- Behavioural indicators (e.g. sitting down and cud chewing).

FEEDLOT PRODUCTION PRACTICES OF CONCERN:

Stressors:

Little can be done about to level of co-mingling that occurs at the sale yards. However at the feedlot have adequate, well-designed receival pens and minimizing the time to fill a pen and the number of purchase groups in a pen. Avoid excessive sorting and re-mingling of cattle. Ensure cattle are processed within 3 days of arrival if possible. Rest tired cattle for at least 24 hours before processing.

Branding:

It is unlikely that with the introduction of the NLIS, fire branding at arrival will survive as an acceptable feedlot procedure. Branding should be discontinued or minimized as much as possible.

Dehorning:

Dehorning should not be done in animals over 8 months of age and should not be done at feedlot entry. This is an uneconomic procedure more so than inhumane. Dehorning needs to be done on property as calves. The promotion of polled bulls and breeds will reduce the number of horned animals. For animals that do arrive with horns, only tip to no shorter than ear length.

Castration:

Having entire bulls arriving at feedlots is not very common. Mature bulls can be fed as entire and in small groups without any undesirable behaviour. Young bulls need to be castrated to prevent injuries from bullying and fighting. Banding is preferable to surgical castration due to the risk of tetanus.

Feedlot Abortion:

When feeding heifers, it is inevitable that some will be pregnant. To avoid this, buyers should only purchase pregnancy tested negative heifers that have been tagged as such. However this can be difficult when purchasing heifers from saleyards. Pregnancy testing and aborting heifers at the feedlot is a cost effective alternative with pregnancy rates as low as 3-4%. Most feedlot veterinarians would argue that an abortion program is predictable and can be managed and is preferable than random calvings that are usually complicated with an emphysematous fetus, calving paralysis or retained placenta and metritis.

Poor Animal Husbandry Practices:

The most common problem in this area is the delay in making a decision to euthanase animals to prevent any further suffering. Simple documented guidelines for the euthanasia of animals need to be drawn up. Some examples are:

- If an animal is recumbent and cannot get up to access feed and water without goading, it should be euthanased unless the animal is down due to a treatable condition.
- An animal that has sustained a broken leg should be euthanased immediately.
- Chronic respiratory cases where the animal is distressed and becoming emaciated should be euthanased.
- If an animal is unable to walk onto a truck without goading.

Handling Cattle:

Working cattle often provokes a level of stress not only in cattle, but in handlers as well. Poor cattle handling skills is a common problem encountered on many feedlots. This is not surprising with an increasing number of stock people who have little or no stock experience prior to joining the feedlot team. There are a large number of people who do not possess cattle handling skills of a suitable standard. This is often manifest by the amount of hollering and use of electric prodders that occur. Training programmes to teach correct cattle handling techniques need to be included in every feedlot training curriculum. The main areas are in the processing and dispatch area and the hospital. These are very stressful areas for cattle to be in.

Facilities:

Facilities must be designed to facilitate cattle movement with maximum ease and without injury. Poor facility design will lead to cattle “balking”. This will lead to increased frustration for man and beast and an increased temptation to use goads, sticks and prodders will occur. Unnecessary noise by equipment and frustrated personnel will add to the problem inducing high levels of stress and fear in the cattle.

Pen Condition:

The condition of the pen where the cattle are confined can cause extreme discomfort. High mud levels in wet weather and excessive dust in dry conditions can cause a lot of stress in cattle. Management of the manure levels is paramount to controlling these conditions.

Shade needs to be considered in all feedlots. ALFA has a heat load risk assessment programme designed to determine what is required to manage heat load in any given site. The hospitals should be shaded.

Overcrowding can result in any number of problems including erratic feeding patterns and consumption, excessive wear and tear on the pads around the water troughs and behind the bunk pad. Overcrowding may also contribute significantly to the severity of the “buller” problem.

SELECTION OF ANIMALS FOR SLAUGHTER:

Each state and territory has its own animal welfare Act and accompanying regulations that affect people who own or work with animals including farmers, livestock transporters, saleyard personnel and processors. Under these Acts, it is an offence to transport, confine, restrain or catch an animal in a way that causes, or is likely to cause, it unnecessary harm.

Recently there has been an increase in the number of complaints emanating from abattoir veterinarians with respect to the condition of cattle at arrival at the abattoir.

An animal is fit to travel if it:

- Is strong enough to undertake the journey.
- Can walk normally, bearing weight on all four legs.
- Is not suffering from any visible disease or injury that could cause it harm during transport.
- Can keep up with the mob both at loading and unloading.
- Is suitable for transport according to the relevant code (special codes for young animals, drought or bushfire animals, etc).
- Is not late in pregnancy (8 months).

Pre Transport Preparation:

- Ensure dispatch yards and loading ramp is adequate for the job.
- Plan the journey.
- Ensure the truck and crate or trailer is safe and of a design that will not cause harm to the livestock.
- Avoid weather extremes, where practicable.

WHAT SHOULD NOT BE SENT TO THE ABATTOIR:

There is considerable variation between abattoirs as to what is considered acceptable and what is not. What can be slaughtered is up to the discretion of the plant veterinarian following the ante-mortem inspection.

Animals that should not be sent are:

- Animals that cannot bear weight on all fore legs.
- Animals that cannot walk up the ramp on its own without excessive goading.
- Open wounds.
- Emaciated animals.
- Abscesses bigger than a grapefruit.
- Pussy discharges from joints or lesions.
- Cancer eye –eye discharging and cannot see.
- More than 8 months pregnant.
- Animals that are clinically sick.

How To Be Prepared For An Inspection If There Is A Complaint?

To ensure that the feedlot is prepared to defend its position in the face of a complaint, a documented protocol should be put in place and be part of the QA system. It is important to keep a record of all suspect animals that are dispatched. This should include the animals ID, what the problem is and a description of it. Describe how it walks if it is lame. Further documentation may take the form of photos or a short digital video clip of each animal.

Another part of the process is the training of dispatch people in the ante-mortem inspection process to avoid sending unacceptable cattle.

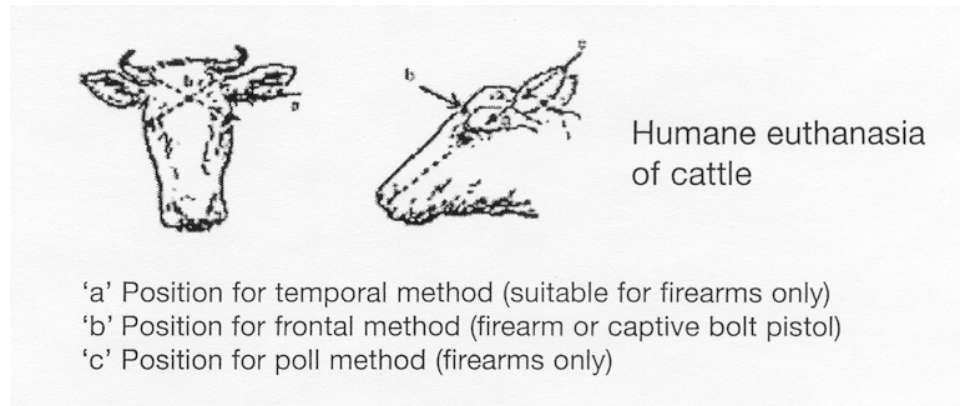
If an animal is unfit for slaughter, then it must be euthanased.

Euthanasia and Humane Destruction of Cattle:

Euthanasia is performed by using either a firearm or a captive bolt. People involved in euthanasing animals by using firearms need to have a firearm license. Euthanasia needs to be quick and reliable to relieve suffering and to be done sooner rather later. It is unacceptable to let animals suffer longer than is necessary. Select personnel who are suitable to euthanase animals. Not all people are comfortable with euthanasing animals and the decision not to do so should be respected.

There are three suitable methods for euthanasing cattle. These are:

- Temporal method (firearm only).
- Frontal method (firearm or captive bolt).
- Poll method (firearm only).



CONCLUSION:

It is important to have an understanding of animal welfare and animal well-being. The feedlot industry needs to pay attention to the concerns of welfare organizations and work with them on issues of welfare. This has been done in the issue of heat load, with good results to date. There is a perception in the community that feedlots are a stressful environment for cattle causing mass “suffering”. This is certainly not the case in a well-designed, well-managed feedlot with well-trained personnel.

The importance of stress in the health and welfare of cattle has been established and there are several situations that can be classified under the heading of stress. These are:

- Thirst, hunger and malnutrition.
- Environmental change.
- Disease, injury, and functional impairment.
- Behavioural, interactive restriction.
- Anxiety, fear, pain and distress.

Animals will suffer from such stressors if they are handled incorrectly. It is important to remember that the level of stress will be determined by the attitude of the handler. Relaxed, calm and confident handlers will have relaxed cattle. The welfare and well-being of the animal should always be the number one priority of people who are handling livestock.

A number of feedlot practices that have the potential to be an area of poor animal welfare were discussed. It is important that unsuitable animals are not sent to slaughter and animals that are unable to be slaughtered or are suffering should be euthanased in a humane way as soon as possible.