

Keeping Scores

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This year marks the fifth anniversary of restaurant-mandated audits of animal welfare practices in meat plants. These audits use the American Meat Institute's scoring system, which quantifies five critical control points. A.M.I.'s system measures the percentage of animals stunned correctly on the first attempt, percentage of animals rendered insensible, percentage of animals that vocalize (moo, bellow or squeal), percentage of animals moved without the use of an electric prod and the percentage of falling animals during handling.

To maintain today's high standards it is important the five C.C.P.s are the focal point of audits. A good C.C.P. measures a multitude of sins. For example, animals can fall down because of a slick floor or they can fall due to rough handling.

A poor stunning score can also be caused by a number of factors, such as poor maintenance, operator training, excited cattle or a slick floor in the stun box. These outcome-based C.C.P.s are objective and easy to measure. They also eliminate variability when different auditors score the same plant because the criteria remains objective.

Keeping the bar high

Maintaining high standards requires continuous measurement. This makes it possible to determine whether or not conditions are improving. It also prevents bad habits from becoming the norm. I have witnessed how a plant can slip back into bad practices and not even realize it. For example, operators may think they are doing a good job without realizing their use of the electric prod has doubled. To prevent this from happening they should conduct internal audits measuring the number of animals electrically prodded.

If a plant is evaluated using a numerical standard it will perform better than it would if only periodic crackdowns seeking zero tolerance were conducted. It's important to remember high standards are attainable, but perfection is not.

In 2003, insensibility was a hot issue. One beef plant was shut down after an inspector discovered a single, partially sensible animal out of several thousand cattle. In another plant, where sheep were being slaughtered, there was no enforcement at all. In this plant more than 30 percent of the sheep regained sensibility after stunning. Enforcement ranged from none to a zero tolerance standard, which was impossible to attain.

It is impossible to eliminate the small percentage of animals that are properly stunned and insensible at hoisting, and subsequently regain partial sensibility prior to bleeding. For regulatory purposes I recommend keeping a running average on the percentage of animals insensible at hoisting that regain partial sensibility before bleeding. However, there must be zero tolerance when it comes to hoisting a fully sensible animal that shows obvious signs of full sensibility such as vocalizing. There must also be a zero tolerance for skinning, scalding, dehairing or removal of any body part of an animal that shows even the smallest sign of partial return to sensibility.

The use of a running average over a period of days or weeks is recommended for plants slaughtering small numbers of animals. A running average could be done on all five C.C.P.s.

Setting limits on the partial return to sensibility control point should be based on data from thousands of animals. In 2003, a total of 7,950 cattle were observed during the restaurant audits. In fed beef there were two partial returns to sensibility after hoisting 5,675 steers or heifers. Cull cows tend to pose the biggest problems in this area. Out of this group there was one sensible animal out of 758 cows. I believe cow and bull processing plants need to improve and the fed beef plants are close to best performance.

In pork, there were two pigs that partially returned to sensibility out of 4,900 observed. All animals were re-stunned prior to skinning or scalding.

Due to concerns about bovine spongiform encephalopathy some plants are now using a non-penetrating stunner. This method of stunning should be held to the same standards as a penetrating captive bolt. Ninety-five percent of the cattle must be rendered insensible with a single shot.

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