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... Exploring Alberta's livestock industry

What's on your plate?

An Advertising Feature

Auditing from an animal point of view

For most people, an audit notice from Revenue Canada or some similar government agency creates a panic reaction. That's why it may be difficult to imagine a meat processing plant actually requiring an audit of their animal welfare practices.

"The Canadian meat industry has always been progressive," says Susan Church, general manager of Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC), an organization formed by Alberta's major livestock groups with a mandate to promote humane treatment of animals within the livestock industry.

As a symbol of this progression, the province's meat industry has paid, on several occasions, to bring Dr. Temple Grandin to assess their humane handling practices. On Friday, she was at the AFAC Livestock Care Conference in Red Deer asking, "Are there yet?" when it comes to animal welfare. Grandin, a world-renowned professor of animal behaviour, has a unique knack for looking at animal care issues from the animal's perspective. She has a passion for learning about livestock behaviour, and that passion is evidenced by the programs she develops to improve animal care.

Most Alberta meat processors view an audit from Grandin as an opportunity to learn and improve. "We've invited her on several occasions and we always learn something," says Dr. Matt Schoonderwoerd, director of pork quality at the Olymel pork processing plant in Red Deer.

"We want to do things right and follow the best standards. It's important to treat animals well."

Generally, Grandin's solutions are simple, and inexpensive. She teaches processors - and others in the industry - how to understand the animal. For instance, the auditing system developed by Grandin

has a simple scoring system of observable outcomes.

"Dr. Grandin's unique perspective is highly regarded by the meat industry worldwide and has prompted them to make changes and put resources into training their people and adapting facilities to improve the environment for the animals," says Church. "Gentle handling and well-designed facilities minimize animal stress. It has the added benefits of improving plant efficiency and maintaining good meat quality."

In the past few years, Grandin has worked closely with the North American meat industry to shed light on ways to improve conditions for animals based on the latest animal behaviour research.

In 1999, McDonald's restaurants hired Grandin because they wanted to ensure that their suppliers were using humane practices. In 2001, McDonald's began using Grandin's guidelines to conduct self-assessments of Canadian meat processing plants. Official audits began in Canada in 2002. Today other restaurants, such as Wendy's and Burger King, also conduct animal welfare audits. These audits have raised the bar in animal care, and have dramatically changed the way meat plants think about animal welfare.

"It's the customer setting the standard," says Schoonderwoerd. Olymel's Red Deer plant performs its own internal animal welfare audits twice daily and has external audits performed at least three times each year. The company has put resources into updating its training video for hog handling. "Voluntarily improving practices is a measure of our commitment to the industry," adds Schoonderwoerd.


"Animal care truly is a priority and I've witnessed a progressive attitude toward animal welfare in the Alberta meat industry," says



Temple Grandin (centre) talks to workers at a processing plant.

Church. "We continue to improve practices, and support research that ensures the humane care of an animal throughout its lifetime. The moral and ethical responsibility of animal care belongs to everybody."

Alberta has 64 provincially-licensed red meat plants and all have been audited for livestock handling and stunning practices. For the meat processing industry and those concerned about animal welfare, the improvements made indicate that in this case, "audit" is not a word to be afraid of.




What is There's a Heifer in Your Tank?

It's all about learning when you least expect it!

University of Alberta professor Dr. Frank Robinson is the creator of this innovative and entertaining way of educating first-year university students about the importance of agricultural research. The program started when Frank challenged his Animal Science 200 students to find the answers to such curious questions as "How many gummy bears can you get from one cow?" Check here monthly for some of the science answers to questions you didn't even know you had about agriculture.

Can chickens communicate with each other?



You may be familiar with pig Latin, but did you know that chickens have their own language as well? Studies have shown that roosters and hens will often call out danger to their chicks. When it's time to eat, a rooster gives "food calls" and the hens respond by looking down for food. And, you've likely heard the crow of the rooster, but did you know his crow has a bigger job than simply waking up the neighbourhood? It also tells the rest of the roosters who's in charge - the longer the "doo", the stronger the rooster.

For more information about Alberta's chicken industry, log on to www.chicken.ab.ca.

Celebrity Kitchen

Company's Coming author has the recipe for success

If you ask Ken Pare what she remembers the most from her childhood, she instantly remarks, "Company."

"During the tail end of the Depression, the Pare household was often full of family, friends or even complete strangers, who were always hungry."

"We just had so much company. Mom fed the men that rode the rails. There would be two men most days," says Pare. "We were at the opposite end of the railway station. They would come to the door and ask if they could have something to eat. We would think there was a market somewhere downtown so they knew which house to go to."

"Mom could make something out of nothing, it seemed like. I remember good meals at home. We were very fortunate though, we had two big gardens."

That sentiment stuck with Pare, who later named her popular cookbooks Company's Coming.

Pare, who grew up in the tiny town of Irma, Alberta, has produced 17 cookbooks and sold more than 25 million copies. She released her first cookbook in 1981, while running a catering business she started in 1963.

"During the years people wanted recipes and I would give them to them," she says, explaining how she decided to put together her first cook book.

Little did she know she would become known as "the recipe queen."

The proof was in the pudding when Pare sold her first press run (15,000) of 150 Delicious Squares cookbooks in only three months.

"I was on the road, I was selling books," says Pare, adding she was so busy she had to give up her catering business.

Today, the eighty 80-year-old still very much involved in her cookbook business. She gets up around 5 a.m. before her alarm and mail walks for half an hour, and then goes into the head office. The majority of her time is spent proofing manuscripts of the books.

"I usually eat my way through the book," she laughs. "I'm always eating. I call it research, and I'll like it, it becomes a recipe."

Pare tries to be health-conscious about the things she eats, but she doesn't restrict herself. She grew upon things made fresh at home, like butter and milk.

"We were bonded by the cow schedule. I've been a milk drinker all my life and I raised a bunch of calves at home too," she jokes. "I have milk for lunch and for supper. Before I go to bed, I have a hot chocolate with milk."

Being healthy is important to her, but she wishes she could change one thing.

"If I was to eat the way I like, I would live on dessert. I remember making the chocolate book," she grins.

So, what does a person who tests recipes for a living eat at home? Pare usually prepares things that are simple to



Photo: for the make and that she can freeze, like roast beef or hamburger patties.

"I had a couple of slices (of roast beef) with my eggs this morning."

"I find that a lot of times before I go to bed, I'm hungry. So I'll have one or two cooked hamburger patties and eat it."

Pare says she's not worried about food safety in Alberta.

"I pay attention to what's out there. I trust our inspectors."

Pare says she's very confident and trusting in Alberta's food safety system and that the real problem is with food in handled when it leaves the grocery store.

"I would be more inclined to say... that the way food is prepared and handled is more of a concern," says Pare.

What's on the menu for Pare in the coming years?

"I want the company to keep on when I'm not here anymore."

Pare was a recipient of the Alberta Entrepreneur of the Year award in 1999 and is a member of the Order of Canada.

For a complete listing of Pare's cookbooks, visit www.companyscoming.com.

Did You Know?

- That although wild turkeys have dark feathers, domestic turkeys have been bred to have white feathers? This is because the skin of a white feathered turkey is more uniform in colour than the skin of a bird with dark feathers and therefore more appealing to consumers.
- That there are many people with full time careers in farm animal care? Specialists dedicate their lives to improve humane handling for farm animals on the farm, on the truck and all the way through the food chain. For more info, visit www.ofac.ab.ca.
- That comfortable, happy Western Holstein cows produce five per cent more milk than their counterparts everywhere else in the country?
- That some barns have water misters to help keep their animals and birds cool and comfortable in the hot weather?
- That each livestock species has a recommended Code of Practice for the care and handling of animals?
- That a high-producing Alberta Holstein cow can fill 25 two-litre containers of milk per day?
- That cows give 8 to 10 per cent more milk if exposed to 16 to 18 hours of light, followed by 6 to 8 hours of darkness?
- That cows love to have their hair brushed?? Installed brushes or daily grooming increases blood circulation, gets rid of parasites, and keeps cows clean and calm.
- That stalls are designed for optimal cow comfort, including space to stand or lie down, a slight upward slope, proper ventilation and mattresses filled with recycled, shredded tires?

Do you have questions or concerns about livestock transportation in Alberta? E-mail us at info@whatsonyourplate.ca.

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Watch for the next installment of What's on your plate? on Sunday April 20