



*For release:*

## **Responding to crisis: Lessons learned from pigeons**

Calgary AB, April 7, 2009: *When pigeon industry bankruptcy blindsided Ontario farmers, the broader industry responded decisively and quickly established animal welfare as top priority, says Crystal Mackay*

Livestock industries are a business like no other. What makes them unique is the culture of working with and caring for animals.

Particularly for many producers, this culture is the most attractive component of working in these industries. However, when tragedy strikes, this human-animal bond and the responsibility and emotions it carries can also be one of the most stressful parts of managing crisis.

An important recent case study was the pigeon crisis in North America, which involved hundreds of pigeon farmers in Ontario who essentially fell victim to an apparent scheme under the veil of Pigeon King International. When these owners received notice that Pigeon King International was bankrupt and owing in excess of \$23 million, they had no income yet their barns were full of thousands of pigeons, many with the little feed.

At the recent Livestock Care Conference in Red Deer, Crystal Mackay, Executive Director for the Ontario Farm Animal Council (OFAC), provided a play-by-play of how OFAC members aided in averting poultry health threats and supporting pigeon welfare during the pigeon crisis.

“Even when these incidents do not appear to affect us directly, often there is a connection at some level,” she says. “These incidents are also opportunities to learn and improve our preparedness.”

Mackay recounted key events in managing the crisis, including six key lessons of value for anyone involved with livestock industries.

### **Lesson #1: Prepare for the worst**

Prevention is the best medicine when it comes to any industry threat, but having the resources in place for a potential crisis should always be a part of good planning, says Mackay. “To be truly prepared, we really have to be prepared for the thing we expect the least.”

In the case of the pigeon industry, producers had little in the way of their own pre-preparedness or resources to respond to crisis. As a result, OFAC members and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) personnel established a working group to step in to take a lead role in managing the situation as it unfolded. The quick and decisive action of the players who stepped in prevented a difficult situation from downward spiraling into outright tragedy. However hoping someone will step in to help is not a good crisis management plan.

“The situation, as bad as it was, could have been a lot worse,” says Mackay. “It’s a lesson to have your resources and partnerships in place ahead of time.”

### **Lesson #2: Do the right thing**

Though the industry represented by OMAFRA and team was not directly involved in the pigeon industry, in nonetheless dove into assisting with the crisis, without hesitation, she says. This action aided in averting broader poultry health threats, preventing additional potential negatives from spreading to other livestock industries and, most importantly, did what was needed.

Responding to those in need is a key part of the culture of livestock industries that, thankfully for those in the pigeon industry, came through when most needed.

“Getting involved with this pigeon problem was about doing the right thing,” says Mackay. “There was very little hesitation. Our members realized we either get involved up front or we’re going to be involved later on with a situation that has not been handled well.”

### **Lesson #3: Talk early and often**

As in any crisis, communication was critical. It was also particularly challenging in this case because the pigeon industry was very loosely organized, with nothing readily available in terms of information on the industry, its business structure, who or how many producers were involved or how to contact them.

The remedy? Establish open lines of communication up front, get the facts out, explain what you don't know and – most important – roll up your sleeves and get to work, says Mackay.

“Much of the first week for many of us was spent on the phone and email gathering information and dealing with a lot of questions. We quickly established a framework for getting the working group together by conference call on a regular basis to share information and coordinate everything we were doing.”

### **Lesson #4: Invite solutions but act quickly**

As part of the process, OMAFRA developed a resource sheet and opened lines of communication for people to call with potential solutions.

The working group realized the pigeon producers themselves were overwhelmed with challenges and questions and couldn't be relied upon to lead. They would need help.

“The producers themselves were holding many meetings to discuss possible options. It was a slow process. Many had lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. So it was difficult to move quickly on things waiting for people that still weren't sure what they wanted to do. We had to push forward ourselves.”

### **Lesson #5: Handle ethical, legal, confidentiality and other considerations**

Once it became clear humane euthanization was the only option, the working group quickly took steps to ensure ethical, legal, confidentiality, liability and other considerations were taken into account.

“There were many concerns to deal with, including literally the million dollar question: who pays? There were also many logistical considerations. With all this going on, some of the secondary aspects such as legal and liability issues can be overlooked, but that's not an option. The more you can be organized and understand what's needed with those components ahead of time, the better.”

Following rapid arrangement of meetings, calls and personnel to get answers on those fronts, the working group responded with a crisis management plan that was industry-driven, delivered in a timely manner and relatively cost effective, using the quickest to access funds in an emergency framework.

Throughout the process, animal welfare was agreed as the top issue and highest priority. All plans were designed around the issue of how best to avert any undue animal suffering. “Other options were considered but ruled out as soon as it became apparent they were unlikely or couldn't happen fast enough. It was a difficult decision; however we realized we needed to be involved with euthanizing right away.”

### **Lesson #6: Don't underestimate emotional toll**

The anxiety faced by the pigeon producers and those involved with handling the crisis was enormous, says Mackay. This was due not only to the business implications and pressure of handling the situation, but very prominently to the raw emotions associated with being involved in the need to euthanize large numbers of birds.

“It was much more stressful than I could have ever imagined,” she says. “A lot of the producers were hoping for better options than euthanizing their birds and it exacted an enormous toll to accept that decision. The emotional trauma was something we weren't prepared for, not just for the producers, but for the staff involved with the working group that worked many long hours for five weeks and a row.”

Having counselors and other resource people to assist in that regard is a key lesson learned that everyone involved will not soon forget, she says. “You have to recognize the human emotional side and support that as best you can. When I think back to the terrible images we saw on TV, with foot and mouth disease in the UK, I can't even imagine the stress that those people were under. That's a part of crisis that is often underestimated that we all can learn from.”