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AFAC meeting provides window on livestock animal care progress

Calgary, Alta., March 31, 2004: Alberta's livestock industry has taken major strides in promoting responsible animal care, an effort that has risen dramatically in importance worldwide and become essential to the future of Canada's livestock industry. That was the overall message delivered by a range of animal care experts and industry leaders who spoke at the Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC) annual general meeting in Edmonton, March 26.

Expectations for the assurance of good animal care practices in livestock production are rising in many parts of the globe, reported Dr. David Fraser, an internationally renowned animal welfare expert and professor of animal welfare at the University of British Columbia.

Society is already demanding verifiable standards for food quality assurance and similar demands are growing for animal care standards.

In recent years, major food companies have moved aggressively to promote verifiable animal care standards among their suppliers in the production and processing chain. Standards are also increasingly being discussed as potential elements of international trade agreements.

Fraser, who kicked-off the meeting with a historical overview, pointed to the involvement of major food retailers in the animal welfare agenda as a watershed moment. "In 1999, McDonald's corporation in the U.S. began requiring animal welfare assurance in their supply line. When it happened, I realized the world of animal welfare standards would never be quite the same again."

Fraser sees clear challenges ahead. One is to achieve animal welfare quality assurance without relying on regulations. A second is to achieve a balance in welfare standards in a broad sense, and a third is to clearly communicate with the public.

The veterinary practice is a key ally for the livestock industry in addressing livestock welfare concerns, say veterinarians Dr. Toni Bayans of the University of Alberta and Dr. Clay Gellhaus of the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association. "The health, welfare and relief from suffering of animals are the dominant interests of a veterinarian," says Gellhaus. "It is time for veterinarians and industry alike to work together toward standards that are recognized by all."

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A major challenge for the industry is dealing with pressure from animal rights groups and understanding the politics of livestock welfare, says Dr. Terry Whiting of the Manitoba Veterinary Services Branch. Many so-called Social Cause Action Groups (SCAGs) are aggressive in getting their messages to the public, and the industry needs a sophisticated approach to counter their attacks. “Producers need to understand that some animal husbandry practices are susceptible to moral challenge. For example, the inhumane practice of loading downer animals. The tendency is to view SCAGs as the enemy, but the more we understand their motivation and their approach, the more effective we can be in dealing with them.”

At the production level, producer education is key, say Sarah Turner of Alberta Quality Pork and Paul Hodgman, Assistant Manager of Alberta Pork. Pork producers have made substantial progress in improving quality assurance of food safety standards through the Canadian Quality Assurance (CQA) program. They’re now in the process of developing a program with similar characteristics to CQA, to deal with on-farm animal care.

“The operational objective of this new initiative is to develop a simple, effective animal care mechanism delivered through the CQA program,” says Hodgman. “Our producers understand the importance of this issue, and we believe with their continued strong support we can make great progress toward verifiable standards.”

“The AFAC meeting is an example of the growing sophistication of animal welfare research and industry programs,” says Susan Church, AFAC Manager. “Perhaps most significant is that AFAC is an industry-led, industry-managed organization whose goal is leadership and to continually search for advancements in animal welfare.

More information and background on AFAC is available on the AFAC Web site at www.afac.ab.ca.

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