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Livestock Care Conference offers window on progress, challenges for Alberta

Calgary, Alta., April 5, 2005: Alberta's livestock industry has made great progress with initiatives to support animal care, but there's more work to be done and key challenges ahead in this rapidly evolving, increasingly high profile area, reported speakers at the Livestock Care Conference, April 1, in Red Deer.

"The Alberta livestock industry is dedicated to responsible animal care and we've made a lot of progress to ensure and strengthen this in our production and handling practices," says Susan Church, Manager of Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC), which hosted the Conference. AFAC is a partnership of Alberta's major livestock groups, with a mandate to promote responsible, humane animal care within the livestock industry.

Among recent achievements, AFAC has worked towards changes to Alberta's Animal Protection Act, improved rural animal protection services through communication with Alberta SPCA, improved handling of non-ambulatory and unfit livestock and funding for a Livestock Care Response consulting veterinarian, says Church. AFAC has also secured new funding to support further research in the science of animal welfare.

"A major highlight for AFAC has been progress on the issue of dealing with unfit livestock," she says. "This has been the focus of a campaign of this organization for the last five years. The industry put its shoulder behind this issue, saying that it's unacceptable to be shipping unfit livestock. The industry and AFAC have delivered a series of guidebooks on humane handling of different livestock species."

Strong, auditable animal care standards, in addition to supporting industry-driven animal care goals, also open potentially lucrative market opportunities, reported Anne Malleau of Whole Foods Market, a Texas-based retailer with 166 stores in the U.S, Canada and the U.K. Whole Food's business approach is based primarily around one of its stated core values - selling the highest quality natural and organic foods available. Implementing animal welfare standards for its meat suppliers has become a major new initiative for the company.

"The most important thing is that we create standards that are based in science," says Malleau, Executive Director of Whole Foods' new Animal Compassion Foundation. "We also recognize that welfare costs money. The idea is that any producer that meets the standards will receive an additional premium, as a profit-sharing approach." Whole Foods' expects to have standards in place for all key livestock by 2008, she says.

Another featured speaker was Tim O'Byrne, who has investigated the livestock transportation issue for many years in Alberta and is now based in the U.S. O'Byrne summarized the Livestock Transportation Review study he conducted for AFAC, and his recent presentations to the American Meat Institute and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.

"One of the greatest benefits of our work in the transportation area has been to better understand the complex relocation process," says O'Byrne. "Also, we have established a strong communication link between the transportation sector and the livestock industry that will be essential to implementing realistic, proactive animal care initiatives in that area."

O'Byrne also reported on his participation, on AFAC's behalf, in a course on Practical Anti-Terrorism Training for the Food Industry, highlighting key security strategies that will help the Alberta livestock industry deal with the threat of animal activist campaigns.

"Our stand has always been changes need to be industry-driven changes - not ones dictated by those outside of our industry coming in and using questionable tactics," says Susan Church. AFAC is supporting several initiatives on the livestock transport issue, including work by O'Byrne and direct efforts with the Animal Transportation Association, an international non-profit organization dedicated to the safe and humane transport of animals.

In other action, Morris Seiferling, Director of Technical Services for Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (AAFRD) announced proposed changes to the Alberta Animal Protection Act and discussed their implications to the industry. Morris Airey, Director of Enforcement of the Alberta SPCA, provided an update of the types of cases handled by Alberta SPCA constables and new organizational plans for an extended rural service, building on recommendations from producers.

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