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Top animal welfare experts highlight record Livestock Care Conference

Calgary, Alta., April 08, 2008: New trends, latest research and leading strategies on farm animal welfare attracted record numbers to the Livestock Care Conference, April 4 in Red Deer. The annual conference, featuring international heavyweights in the field, is hosted by Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC), a partnership of Alberta's major livestock groups with a mandate to promote responsible, humane animal care within the livestock industry.

“We’re pleased to have you participate in what we believe is the largest livestock animal welfare conference ever held in Canada,” outgoing AFAC Chair Dr. Terry Church told the more than 230 livestock producers, students and other industry representatives in attendance. “This is a strong testament to the commitment of the industry to animal care and to all of the work that has gone on in this province to support and promote that commitment.”

Church’s comments were reinforced in a brief welcome by John Knapp, Deputy Minister, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, who commended industry livestock care efforts. “Right now, when our livestock sector is going through a period of not just difficulty but great difficulty, we need the type of support that AFAC can bring,” says Knapp. “While a regulatory system is vital to the messaging about animal care and the standards of care, the work that the industry does through AFAC is supremely important as an educator and integrator across livestock sectors.”

The main conference session was highlighted by a presentation by Dr. Temple Grandin of Colorado State University on “Are we there yet?” in livestock care. Grandin, one of the world’s leading authorities on animal welfare issues and a designer of handling systems used widely in North America, delivered a presentation jam-packed with proven rules of thumb on how to handle livestock humanely and effectively. Throughout, she hammered on the need for simple, practical and measurable approaches to livestock care.

In a compelling talk, punctuated with nuggets of wisdom such as “Scoring prevents bad from becoming normal,” and “See things from the animal’s point of view,” Grandin provided a comprehensive overview of what has worked and what still needs attention to improve livestock well-being.

She emphasized the need for all involved with the issue, including policy makers, regulators and food company executives, to get an on-the-ground perspective of what happens on the farm to make sure all solutions make practical sense. “Eyes need to be opened up,” says Grandin. “When things get abstract, that’s when you get problems.”

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Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC) Association
Cambrian PO Box 75028 Calgary, Alberta T2K 6J8
Phone: (403) 932-8050 Fax: (403)932-8052
Email: info@afac.ab.ca Website: www.afac.ab.ca

Providing an overview of international developments and trends in animal welfare was another leading international authority, Dr. John Webster of the University of Bristol in England. Webster was a founding member of the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council and is the original proponent of the “five freedoms” concept that has become central to emerging animal welfare policy and strategies worldwide. The concept states that farm animals should enjoy freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury and disease; freedom to express normal behavior; and freedom from fear and distress.

Webster portrayed new expectations as moving toward a “virtuous bicycle” model, where incorporating welfare standards as part of food quality assurance can deliver benefits to all parts of a “fork-to-farm” market-driven chain, including animals, producers and consumers. “This includes profit-generating opportunities for farmers related to producing a value added product, which are critical to their survival in a competitive environment.”

Dr. Ed Pajor from Purdue University in Indiana noted that emerging animal welfare policy from powerful world bodies such as the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) is set to have a major influence on policy on North America and that the free market is already having a major impact, with major food companies increasingly preferring to work with suppliers who can provide proof of responsible animal welfare practices. “This means higher expectations for the livestock industry, but it can also mean a great opportunity for those who can provide this assurance,” says Pajor.

Dr. John Church, Livestock Welfare Specialist with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, reported recent progress in providing livestock care assurance at meat plants in the province. Alberta has 50 licensed red meat plants, all of which have been audited for livestock handling and stunning practices. Dr. Terry Whiting of Manitoba Agriculture outlined the role and challenges of potential legislative approaches.

Wrap-up speaker Dan Murphy, commentator with U.S.-based *Meat & Poultry* magazine, offered perspective on how the livestock industry can reframe its message to the public to battle the rhetoric of animal activist groups and better showcase the good things it is doing. “You folks are the vanguard,” he told participants. “You have the credibility to speak up and speak out for your industry.”

“This conference has been designed to bring together international leaders in animal care in a major educational effort,” says Susan Church, AFAC Manager. “More information on AFAC including additional articles on the Livestock Care Conference is available at www.afac.ab.ca.”

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For more information, contact:

Susan Church, Manager
Alberta Farm Animal Care Association (AFAC)
Phone: (403) 932-8050
info@afac.ab.ca

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