

A Commitment to Caring

Animal welfare is important to all livestock producers. Alberta Farm Animal Care is continually seeking the best way to handle and care for livestock.

Producers are the first to speak up and seek out answers when they see a problem with their production practices. A great example was in 1993, when nine major livestock groups got together to form Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC). Now with 14 founding members and 75 active and associate members, AFAC seeks to promote responsible, humane animal care while encouraging and funding research relevant to the ever-changing needs of the industry.

"The agricultural sector increasingly recognizes that the welfare of livestock is crucial to successful economics. Animal welfare is an integral part of a food quality continuum. A healthy animal is one that has been handled, cared for, and transported in a humane and dignified way," explains Susan Church, Manager of Alberta Farm Animal Care. "Alberta's entire food chain, from producer to consumer, benefits by ensuring all livestock animals are produced in a humane and healthy environment."

Producers are the ones driving change. For example, the egg layer industry came to AFAC with an issue regarding spent hen disposal, Church says. Producers knew it would be more humane to avoid transporting live hens by disposing of them on farm, but weren't sure how. "That sparked collaboration between engineers, animal behaviourists, and producers to find the best solution. From there, we now have prototypes ready to be evaluated to resolve this concern for hens and producers alike."

AFAC knows that the livestock industry faces an onslaught of public scrutiny, and welcomes it. The organization focuses on funding research with over-arching implications, like transport stress, pain mitigation, and confinement systems. In this way, AFAC can have answers ready for producer and consumer concerns as they come down the pipeline. Aart Okkema is Chair of AFAC and a dairy producer. He's impressed by the brainstorming that members of AFAC take part in to deal with potential issues before they become a

problem. "We get together every six weeks for a roundtable. There is a strong synergy between the groups, and when one group champions a project it makes for a real incentive for other groups to do the same," he explains. "We always have animal welfare on the front burner."

AFAC has done great work in transferring the knowledge gained from its research to producers and consumers alike. "We've developed handbooks and guidelines, and even educational packages for school kids. As an organization, we often bring in Dr. Temple Grandin (a world-class animal welfare expert) to work with the bulk of the livestock industry. She has a unique gift of really driving home the message of the benefits of responsible animal care. Alberta Farm Animal Care is about actively improving animal welfare for the sake of animals, producers, and consumers," Okkema says. The organization seizes every opportunity to communicate what producers are already doing to ensure humane practices, including interactive displays, publications, and educational resources.

Church highlights that AFAC's work contributes to food safety, animal welfare, and human safety as well, by outlining and encouraging best management practices. Applicable research findings into areas such as animal husbandry, the animals' environment, and housing are being passed on to producers through great education programs. Consumers can gain peace of mind knowing that producers and Alberta Farm Animal Care are diligently keeping watch over those who can't speak for themselves.

r&d

Where on the Web

For a full listing of Alberta Farm Animal Care's research projects, resources, and information, visit its web site at: www.afac.ab.ca.