



Media Release

Innovative ideas ‘push the envelope’ at AFAC Livestock Care Conference

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HIGH RIVER, ALBERTA — What forces are shaping the future of farm animal care? How can producers keep profitable and sustainable while meeting new expectations? What are the ideas and opportunities ‘pushing the envelope’ to help Alberta’s livestock industries on the path of continual improvement?

These questions and others were the focus at a packed-house 2017 Livestock Care Conference, hosted by Alberta Farm Animal Care (AFAC), March 21-22 in Leduc, Alta. The conference, themed “Pushing the Envelope,” featured leading speakers on a number of hot topics in farm animal care, who offered insights and led discussion among a diverse audience of producers and others representing agriculture and the farm animal care community.

“Livestock welfare improvement may be viewed as a journey,” says Dr. David Mellor, a top international researcher and scholar based at the Animal Welfare Science and Bioethics Centre, Massey University in New Zealand. “We have come a long way in the journey and today we are benefitting from new knowledge and opportunities to take us further ahead.”

The latest updated thinking includes a shift in fundamental paradigms, including the famous “Five Freedoms” concept supporting responsible livestock welfare. Mellor shared a renewed vision led by himself and colleagues toward a new “Five Domain Assessment Model” that modernizes and adds sophistication to this concept, while improving the incorporation of objective measures for assessing welfare.

Dealing with external expectations, which often reflect a knowledge gap and disconnect from agriculture, is a persistent challenge, says Dr. Bernard Rollin of Colorado State University, a colorful Harley-riding philosopher and animal welfare bioethicist. But animal agriculture can forge ahead admirably by simply continuing to focus on doing what’s right, proactively seeking improvement, and making inroads in sharing its story. “As you navigate the ethics of animal care and seek to do what is right for the animals, let common sense and your conscience be your guide,” says Rollin. “Don’t participate in BS. Do the right thing.”

The conference agenda also offered insights on specific areas of progress. Highlights included a unique case-study perspective on practical strategies and new thinking in swine production by Dr. Yolande Seddon of the University of Saskatchewan, who explored the pros and cons of innovative approaches such as weekly dynamic mixing. “Not everything new is perfect or a fit for every operation,” says Seddon. “But there are many advantages both for the animals and for production that can be captured, by simply taking the first step of being open minded to considering the new options. The key is to keep focused on connecting the dots between welfare and good production.”

Everyone involved in livestock production has an important role to play, says Dr. Mike Petrik, who authors a popular blog “Mike the Chicken Vet” and has built a strong following as a poultry industry spokesperson and animal welfare advocate. Petrik delivered an equal parts humorous and insightful talk on “A day in the life of a chicken vet” and emphasized communication and teamwork to support farm animal care.

“The truth is there’s no such thing as a typical day,” says Petrik. “But that’s part of what makes this job great. You have to take each day as it comes and problem solve, sometimes from out of left field. Sometimes it’s like being a detective and the key to getting the solution right is using the people around you. Everyone involved with a flock has something to add to the discussion. It’s rewarding to be part of an industry where many people bring a sincere passion and daily commitment to contribute.”

A growing and increasingly important opportunity for all types of farms is to step up and tell their story, says Krista Stauffer, a.k.a. “The Farmer’s Wifey” who has practiced what she preaches, building a strong following for her popular blog and social media activity, which is devoted to advocating through honest sharing of family and work life on a first generation dairy farm. Particularly when it comes to improving understanding of sensitive topics such as animal welfare, this type of outreach is an increasingly powerful way to reach the public and have a positive influence, she says. “Don’t be afraid to share it all . . . the good and the bad, the ups and downs. Being real is what truly connects, to build trust and understanding.”

Open communication with the public has worked well for Calgary Stampede, including in building understanding on animal welfare, says Kristina Barnes, Communications Manager for Western Events and Agriculture, in a joint “Rodeo Showcase” along with Dr. Ed Pajor of the University of Calgary. Important advances in knowledge and opportunities for improvement are also being made via a range of pioneering research. “There is a lot of misconception about animal welfare related to rodeo,” says Pajor. “This research helps us better identify and measure what is really happening as a basis for improving understanding.”

At the retail level, research indicates consumer attitudes on animal welfare are increasingly influencing purchasing behavior, says Dr. Ellen Goddard, University of Alberta. “Often negative perceptions based on misconceptions are playing a role. This highlights the importance of better connecting with consumers.”

Discussion at the conference reflected the spirit of welcome messages by Dr. Gerald Hauer of Alberta Agriculture and Forestry, and by Dr. Angela Greter, Executive Director of AFAC. “We all have a shared interest in farm animal care,” says Hauer. “We need to continue to work together to ensure our approach is coordinated, effective and continuously improved.” That speaks directly to AFAC’s role, says Greter. “The value of AFAC is in working together collaboratively to understand and manage the issues we are all facing, while being proactive in seeking opportunities for advancement. The community represented in this room has a strong role to play in the future of farm animal care.” More information on AFAC and the conference is available at www.afac.ab.ca.

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