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# A proactive blueprint to demonstrate on-farm animal welfare

Anna K. Johnson

*Iowa State University*, johnsona@iastate.edu

Jessica D. Colpoys

*Truman State University*

Arlene Garcia

*Texas Tech University*

Cassandra Jass

*Iowa Select Farms*

Suzanne T. Millman

*Iowa State University*, smillman@iastate.edu

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# A proactive blueprint to demonstrate on-farm animal welfare

## **Abstract**

Farm animal welfare has become an increasing area of consumer and customer interest globally and this has resulted in dramatic changes related to on-farm accountability. Some markets are demanding an on-farm, transparent and accountable animal welfare program. Knowing what key elements are required is critical. Key elements range from (a) caretaker qualities; (b) record keeping and standard operating procedures (SOP) (c) animal- and resource based measures (d) communication and (e) caretaker empowerment. The ultimate on-farm welfare program goal is to provide the highest animal care. This review paper will provide context to these key elements that in turn can be used to create or improve an on-farm animal welfare program.

## **Keywords**

accountability, assessment, audit, caretaker, farm, proactive, welfare

## **Disciplines**

Agriculture | Animal Sciences | Large or Food Animal and Equine Medicine | Rural Sociology

## **Comments**

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## **Authors**

Anna K. Johnson, Jessica D. Colpoys, Arlene Garcia, Cassandra Jass, Suzanne T. Millman, Monique D. Pairis-Garcia, Christopher J. Rademacher, Shawna L. Weimer, and Samaneh Azarpajouh

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Anna K. Johnson<sup>1</sup>, Jessica D. Colpoys<sup>2</sup>, Arlene Garcia<sup>3</sup>, Cassandra Jass<sup>4</sup>,  
Suzanne T. Millman<sup>5</sup>, Monique D. Pairis-Garcia<sup>6</sup>, Christopher J. Rademacher<sup>5</sup>,  
Shawna L. Weimer<sup>7</sup>, Samaneh Azarpajouh<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Animal Science, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, 50011

<sup>2</sup>Department of Agricultural Science, Truman State University, Kirksville, MO, 63501

<sup>3</sup>Animal and Food Science, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, 800

<sup>4</sup>Production Well-Being Division, Iowa Select Farms, Iowa Falls, Iowa, 50126

<sup>5</sup>Department of Veterinary Diagnostic and Production Animal Medicine, College of Veterinary Medicine, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, 50011

<sup>6</sup>Department of Animal Science, College of Food, Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, 43210

<sup>7</sup>Department of Animal Science, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, 47907

Correspondence: A. K. Johnson, 2356-F Kildee Hall, Ames, IA, 50011. (515) 294-2098,  
[johnsona@iastate.edu](mailto:johnsona@iastate.edu)

ORCID digital-identifier

AJ: 0000-0001-7687-0465

AG: 0000-0002-8186-6900

SM.: 0000-0001-5752-4647

SW: 0000-0001-5653-6945

SA: 0000-0002-7854-7060

MPG: 0000-0002-6005-5666

## Abstract

Farm animal welfare has become an increasing area of consumer and customer interest globally and this has resulted in dramatic changes related to on-farm accountability. Some markets are demanding an on farm, transparent and accountable animal welfare program. Knowing what key elements are required is critical. Key elements range from (a) caretaker qualities; (b) record keeping and standard operating procedures (SOP) (c) animal- and resource

based measures (d) communication and (e) caretaker empowerment. The ultimate on-farm welfare program goal is to provide the highest animal care. This review paper will provide context to these key elements that in turn can be used to create or improve an on-farm animal welfare program.

Keywords: accountability, assessment, audit, caretaker, farm, proactive, welfare

## Review Methodology

We searched the following databases: Pub Med and Agricola (Keyword search terms used audit, assessment, caretaker, cattle, broiler, hen, pig, poultry, sheep and welfare).

## Introduction

Farm animal welfare is a critical aspect of livestock production and customers and consumers of animal products continue to request information on how animals have been raised, handled, transported and processed (Grandin, 2007 [1]; Hemsworth et al., 2009 [2]; Johnson, 2008 [3], 2009 [4]). With this increased focus on farm animal welfare, one could ask, “*Why do not all farms have a well written, defined and implemented animal welfare program?*” The lack of, or a non-functioning on-farm welfare program can be attributed, in the authors opinion to several factors including but not limited to (a) labor shortage and/or open positions resulting in overworked caretakers that can only manage day-to-day critical farm needs. (b) Caretaker personnel with little to no experience in animal care and little understanding of on-farm animal welfare expectations. (c) Lack of outside support and/or resources at the local or national level to provide guidance and help create an on-farm welfare program. (d) No demand for a program from customer/retailer. (e) Caretakers that does not consider on-farm animal welfare as a high priority. (f). Caretakers that think that they already have high welfare standards. This review paper will provide livestock companies and caretakers information to create or improve their on-farm animal welfare program. Information will cover hiring and firing, training, specifics of an on-farm welfare program and an investigation plan if a claim of abuse or neglect is levied against your farm. Much of this review paper has been drawn from the extensive experience of the co-authors and can be applied to all livestock species, regardless of farm size, geographical location and housing system.

## Hiring for compassion

A solid on-farm animal welfare program begins with compassionate people. Caretakers are responsible for providing essential resources and making daily observations and decisions that can affect animal welfare. Therefore, caretakers can be a farm's greatest asset or greatest liability. When hiring, many employers ask, "[w]hat question(s) can I ask to determine if they are going to be kind to my animals?" Compassion is a highly desirable trait (Hazel et al., 2018 [5]; Valadez-Noriega et al., 2011 [6]), but as is seen in the healthcare profession, complex demands can place extraordinary stress on nurses struggling to work in overburdened healthcare systems. The result can be the inability to care well for others, leading to compassion fatigue, burnout and increased numbers leaving the profession (Nolte et al., 2017 [7]). Nolte and colleagues (2017) reported that four themes related to compassion fatigue were found by consensus discussion. The themes included physical ("just plain worn out") and emotional symptoms ("walking on a tightrope"), triggering factors ("an unbearable weight on shoulders" and "alone in a crowded room"), and measures to overcome/prevent ("who has my back?"). Although yet published, it could be hypothesized that with complex demands, more transparency and questions being asked from stakeholders and increasing animals in livestock facilities that livestock caretakers become fatigued and may lose their compassion.

Compassion, as noted by Donovan (2010[8]) is not teachable, rather it is an inherent, internal person trait. It is therefore advisable that animal welfare expectations are clearly written in the job description and solid background checks are completed before hiring. The National Pork Board provides sample interview questions, background checks, whistle blower policy and animal welfare policies (NPB, 2018a [9]). In addition, Prohand Pigs, a training program targeting caretaker attitudes and behaviors, provides a survey that can be taken by newly hired caretakers that identifies personality traits that may impact positive or negative animal handling (Animal Welfare Science Centre, 2018 [10]). Unfortunately, there is no known assessment evaluating if a potential caretaker will abide by the companies animal welfare standards.

The statement "*Animal husbandry is more than just the physical tasks of taking care of animals. It involves compassion and commitment*" is a pivotal statement made by Donovan (2010 [8]). While caretakers can be trained on the physical tasks related to animal care, it can be difficult to ensure their compassion and commitment to animal welfare while they complete these tasks. Trying to ascertain someone's compassion during an interview is difficult, but

presenting open ended interview questions can also help an interviewer understand how the interviewee thinks in a challenging situation, their logical progression and conclusions (Cates, 2018 [11]). Two examples of open-ended questions are “*What drives you*” or “*What are you passionate about related to this opportunity*” would help provide some additional background. During an interview, employers can clearly communicate their animal welfare expectations and then at hiring, employers must dedicate time talking through their company’s animal welfare expectations. It should not be assumed that they will know what livestock compassion means, so, time spent defining this, providing practical examples, discussing policies and how one would report abuse and neglect are important.

### On-boarding

Caretaker retention on farm is low (EC, 2015 [12]; MAFF 2011 [13]) and less than 1% of the total number of U.S. salary and wage producers are hired farmworkers (USDA ERS, 2016 [14]). Consequently, caretaker population on-farm is small and constantly changing. Furthermore, caretaker demographics has changed, with approximately half of all farm caretakers in the U.S. classified as Hispanic. Their first language is Spanish making communication challenging, and many have less than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education (15 year old; USDA ERS, 2016 [14]). These facts are important when one considers training. It is advised that on-farm job shadowing occur with a seasoned mentor that can effectively communicate with the new caretaker and utilize training programs that do not inhibit a caretaker whom has limited reading or writing skills (Mullins et al 2018 [15]).

The on-boarding process and initial animal welfare training cannot be underestimated. Ideally, a new caretaker has both classroom (defined as learning SOP’s, being trained in welfare programs, going through paperwork) and job shadowing (defined as on-farm practical training) experiences to familiarize them with their roles and responsibilities. Caretakers will come from a variety of educational backgrounds, school, through to and including a degree. For example, there are 70 animal science departments in the United States, many of which have specialized tracks for students entering into the industry post-graduation (Kramer, 2018 [16]). However, non-traditional routes such as non-thesis Masters, industry certification, audit training and extension programs can also provide the caretaker with knowledge.

The role of a mentor (defined as a seasoned producer whom is confident in animal welfare, patient and easy to approach) is essential in setting animal welfare tone for the mentee. Assigning a new caretaker to a farm that has a seasoned mentor for job shadowing should, in theory, provide a robust training platform and help retention [Brouwer, 2008[17]; Glenn, 1996 [18]; Harlander, 1996 [19]). The length of time that a new producer job shadows would be dependent on the skills that he/she has or establishes and task complexity. However, no new caretaker should be allowed to conduct a task unsupervised without displaying competency. Donavan (2010 [8]) made an elegant note, that barn culture is very important for all aspects of farming. Barn culture is foundational when related to on-farm animal welfare. This goes beyond training, records, SOP's and the day-to-day tasks. This is core to the values and expectations of all whom work for the company. Educational programs will not teach a sense of pride, compassion and responsibility for animal welfare, this comes from farm culture that animal welfare is a top priority daily. This message was delivered in a focus group conducted by Mullins and colleagues (*in press* [20]) on timely euthanasia. This study demonstrated that barn culture played a critical role in the timely euthanasia accountability on swine farms.

Finally, an expectation is that caretakers will be asked questions during assessments and audits about their daily duties and the welfare program, therefore practicing these questions in a safe and supportive environment is a good idea (Purdue Extension, 2018 [21]). Practice questions and follow-up discussion could occur between farm managers to caretakers. Think about practicing the following questions:

- Do you know what 'animal care' means to this farm?
- What animal care training have you had?
- Tell me who is in charge of sick/hospital pens?
- How do you know how long that animal has been in the hospital pen?
- Why is this animal in the hospital pens?
- Can you tell me how you know if an animal is responding to treatment?
- If you saw an animal being abused, what would you do?

Developing an on-farm animal welfare program

*Know your markets*

Cooperatives, packers, further processors, customers and consumers are increasingly concerned about humane livestock treatment. The European Food Safety Authority [22]) notes that animal welfare is an important part of EFSA's remit. The safety of the food chain is indirectly affected by the welfare of animals, particularly those farmed for food production, due to the close links between animal welfare, animal health and food-borne diseases. Stress factors and poor welfare can lead to increased susceptibility to disease among animals. This can pose risks to consumers, for example through common food-borne infections like Salmonella, Campylobacter and E. Coli. When creating an on-farm animal welfare program, it is important for caretakers to start by addressing relevant market or legislative welfare expectations (Pairis-Garcia et al., 2016 [23]).

McDonalds is one example that have clear animal welfare at slaughter, housing, live transport and chicken welfare expectations. Regarding housing, promoting animal health and welfare it notes: *“In the U.S., we’re working with pork suppliers to phase out the use of gestation stalls (small enclosed pens) for housing pregnant sows by 2022. By 2017, McDonald's will source pork for its U.S. business only from producers who share our commitment to phase out gestation stalls. Across our Europe region, 100% of our pork is already sourced from farms that do not use gestation crates. In the U.K. and the Netherlands, we use 100% Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Assured pork, which means that all pig farmers are required to provide bright, airy environments for pigs, bedded pens and plenty of space for them to move around.”* Regarding chickens, *“Similarly, 100% of the chickens used for meat in our global supply chain are reared only in cage-free systems. We do not accept any chickens raised in caged housing, inclusive of stacked or patio systems. These commitments will impact more than 70% of our global chicken supply and will be fully implemented on or before 2024”* (McDonalds, 2018 [24]). Therefore, all caretakers should have a clear understanding of animal welfare market expectations. Implementing a market chain requirement, may give- keep or increase market access, or a caretaker may be able to shift into new alternative markets.

In addition, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) technical specification ISO/TS34700 Animal welfare management – General requirements and guidance for organizations in the food supply chain, provides the livestock and poultry industries to develop an animal welfare plan that is aligned with the principles of the World Organization of Animal Health (OIE) Terrestrial Animal Health Code and ensure farm animal welfare across the



supply chain. The ISO/TS 34700 represents the culmination of a joint effort between ISO and the OIE following the cooperation agreement signed in 2011 between the two organizations as it relates to animal welfare. The new technical specification is intended to support the implementation of relevant practices to ensure animal welfare in livestock production systems. It will be a way for business operators in the food supply chain to demonstrate their commitment to animal welfare management (ISO, 2018 [25]).

### *Teamwork*

A welfare team can be beneficial for writing a well-rounded, on-farm animal welfare program. The team ideally would include an animal welfare specialist, a practicing veterinarian, a production supervisor and an individual from human resources that are all species specialized. Utilizing a team for creating the on-farm animal welfare program is beneficial for addressing different viewpoints, skills and perceptions. Combining science with ethics, moral obligations, experience and education will construct a strong program.

### *Program facets*

The authors will provide some guidelines in this next section as to what should be considered for inclusion in the on-farm welfare program.

### *Objectives and goals*

Before creating a welfare program, objective(s) and measurable goal(s) should be identified. Having clear objectives and goals will ensure all team members are working towards a similar outcome, provide a foundation to build program elements, and be beneficial for program validation. For example:

#### *Objectives:*

1. Empower caretakers to make excellent animal welfare choices
2. Be clear about the consequences of poor direct and indirect decisions on animal welfare
3. Use accepted on-farm animal welfare practices to provide the animal a life worth living and caretakers a high quality working environment
4. Provide incentive programs to meet predetermined welfare goals

Goals:

1. Improve caretaker retention and job satisfaction
2. Increase livestock survivability
3. Decrease medication and treatment costs
4. Enhance timely euthanasia
5. Decrease caretaker injuries related to animal interaction
6. Decrease fatigued and injured animals during the marketing process

*Key elements*

In the U.S., and globally, associations have outlined on-farm welfare program expectations [26-39]. There are four main compliance areas; these are (1) record keeping/training (b) SOP's (c) animals and (d) facilities. Some elements may be species dependent. Think about having all material accessible in a producer's native language (Table 1).

Table 1. Key elements that could be included in an on-farm welfare program. Information adapted from 26-39

Records/Training	SOP	Animals	Facilities
Animal welfare policy	Animal welfare policy	Handling	Feed and water access
1-800 hotline / information posted on self-reporting	Willful acts of abuse and neglect and how to report it	Space allowance	Air quality
Emergency backup testing	Handling	Body condition score	Emergency backup
Euthanasia plan	Feed and water	Lameness	Penning
Euthanasia equipment maintenance	Euthanasia	Abscesses	Flooring
Producer training	Medication and treatments	Wounds (vulva, shoulder, flanks, tails, ears etc.)	Chutes
Certification in programs for that species		Scratches	Alleyways
Welfare assessment certificates	Processing (identification, castration, tail docking, comb removal etc.,)	Hernias	Feeders / waterers
Daily animal observation	Daily observation	Removal of dead's	Handling areas
Mortality	Nutritional formulation	Sickness	Euthanasia areas
Medication and treatment	Veterinary-Veterinary-Client-Patient relationship (VCPR)		
Emergency action plan			

In addition it is important to highlight two critical areas that are paramount to animal welfare; willful acts of abuse and neglect, and humane euthanasia. Within willful acts of abuse and neglect, you should think carefully about the language. An example of production abuse from the National Pork Board is purposefully malicious hitting/beating an animal and placing prods on sensitive areas on an animal (NPB, 2016 [30]). An example of production neglect would be the producer purposefully not providing feed and water to animals' (MSU, 2018 [40]).

Some laws and markets may have specific welfare expectations related to resource-based measures. For example, the Council Directive for pigs provides floor area for wean to growing pigs (Council Directive 2008/120/EC [37]) and laying hens as it relates to cage size (Council Directive 1999/74/EC [38]). An example of an animal-based marking measure would come through the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to animals (RSPCA) Assured. For ducks, it does not permit bill trimming, claw trimming and wing clipping (RSPCA, 2015 [39]). If your markets do not have documented on-farm welfare expectations, then we advise reviewing at least 12-months production records to determine your ranges and averages. Be cautious and do not set your expectation measures too high or low. For example, if your lameness were at an average of 15%, one option would be to strive for an acceptable level at 12% and work towards this new level. Another option would be to consult with an extension agent or your veterinarian to identify lameness measures appropriate for your region. Once attained, these acceptance measures can then be reviewed and adjusted as continuous improvements occur.

### Empowering the team

Caretakers need to feel valued; they need to understand their role and why and what they do matters for the animal, themselves and the company (Baggett et al., 2016 [41]; Pane et al., 2012 [42]). Individual caretaker empowerment begins day one, and must continue throughout their career. It is not adequate for caretakers' to just be competently trained; mentors need to explain why tasks matter, why it is done this way and how it affects animal welfare. On-farm welfare programs might be considered as 'busy extra work with no meaning', so explaining and hence empowering caretakers will make them feel valued and that their role is critical and valued.

### *Communication plan*

Message points will differ if you are talking to cooperatives, packers, further processors, customers, consumers or another caretaker. One essential communication tool is an updated website that includes your program, along with your animal welfare objectives and goals. Perhaps short video clips that can interface between the farm-animal-caretakers and the end user. Sending newsletters, holding conference calls and face-to-face meetings to the entity that you sell directly to can keep them informed of the program's success. Making sure that you have a professional relationship with persons throughout the marketing chain as it relates to animal welfare is critical. It is advisable to solicit a critical review of your program from all stakeholders to make sure that it is meeting their needs and expectations. Another important communication consideration is "*Who is your animal welfare spokesperson if a negative claim is made against your farm?*" Speaking from our own personnel experience and reviewing Ansel and Leeson (2010) [43], speaking with media particularly after an animal abuse or neglect claim is emotionally exhausting. It is very important before you begin communicating to frame your message and your media story. The message maybe that there is no truth to the claim and provide evidence, or to admit that things went wrong and how you (serving in that role for the company) are going to fix them. Ansel and Leeson (2010) [43], provided some excellent media tips for spokespersons to provide information coherently, correctly and factually.

(1) Recognize that even before the media have begun asking details related to a claim, that some reporters may have set the story line. Media stories can be based around several key players, there is a victim (usually the animal), there is a villain (likely a caretaker, the farm or a company), there is a village idiot (which might also be the villain), there is the hero (perhaps the undercover whistle blower, a welfare/rights group) and there is the expert (veterinarian or academia usually fill this space).

(2) Media want soundbites. These soundbites may not be what you want to say because you do not know what their story is, and most reporters are unwilling to divulge that information. It is important to identify two to three soundbites of your own and work those into your answers. Keep these soundbites, short, simple and make sure that they reflect your value compass.

(3) Link your soundbites to your company's value compass. Remember, the general public often do not initially care what you know, rather they want to know you care.

(4) Repeat your sound bites but do not mention them after every question otherwise, it sounds forced and too scripted.

- (5) Be honest, be accountable, be forth coming and stay on task.
- (6) If unsure about where the reporter is going with a question or even how it is relevant to the claim, then it is within your right to ask some follow up questions of your own. For example “*I am sorry, I did not understand the question, could you kindly repeat it?*” and if you still are not sure or unhappy with the question you could follow up with “*Please could you ask this question in another way?*”
- (7) If you feel as if you have answered the question competently and the reporter continues to ask the same question with slight variations on the wording, then simply begin your information again with “*As I have previously said [fill in the details of what you have already noted]...*” These questions not only provide you with clarification as needed, but can also buy yourself time to think through what you are trying to convey.
- (8) Be careful about using words that the reporter asks, or being asked by the reporter to repeat the question. Your replies can be truncated to give the wrong message. For example, the reporter asks “*Why do you abuse pigs?*” and you answer “*We do not abuse pigs*”, thus the word ‘abuse’ has now been said by you and could be used in the final story.
- (9) Be prepared for the loaded, unexpected and/or curve ball type question(s).
- (10) Remember, the story will only be as weak as your weakest quote.
- (11) If you did have an issue then own it. Be accountable, deliver the message with passion and emotion, and clearly note how you will fix it.
- (11) Always be in ‘on mode’, assume that recording devices are always on and never let your guard down.

### *Reporting*

We never wish to think that a caretaker would intentionally hurt an animal under their care. Yet, animal agriculture is no different to any industry that involves humans. In our opinion, the majority of caretakers are very competent at their jobs and have exceptional compassion. However, there is always a risk that an incidence will occur and therefore, it is imperative to have a clear policy and procedure in place to thoroughly investigate, and if needed to fire those caretakers. It is vital to set up the grass roots culture that the caretaker reporting suspected abuse and or neglect will not be victimized and that their role within the company is not going to be in jeopardy for making a valid report. All caretakers should know how to make a report. Reporting

could be to their manager, or a specific person within the company (i.e. the welfare specialist or your veterinarian) could handle reports. Another option is that you wish to work with an outside source. Either way, the aim is that every caretaker is empowered and feels safe in making a report knowing that this is in the animal's best interest, that the claim will be taken seriously and resolved. Caretakers should also be aware that making malicious reporting or retaliation will not be tolerated and the consequences related to these actions.

### *Internal and external accountability*

Once you have created- and implemented the on-farm welfare program you should then ask “*Are we meeting our goals and objectives?*” and “*Where we are doing well, and what still needs improvement?*” An internal assessment is an excellent way to mitigate risk (McGlone, 2004 [44]). Assessments can provide factual data, relevant to the farm/system. Assessments can identify things that are in program compliance, items that are under performing or areas that are missing. Furthermore, a comprehensive plan for resolution can be implemented. How often one needs to complete internal assessments maybe based on industry, market or law expectations. For example, the Pork Quality Assurance-Plus program suggests quarterly sow farm visits for the breeding herd and semi-annual visits for the non-breeding herd (NPB, 2018b [30]). A third-party audit helps confirms farms complies with welfare expectations and standards if there is a contractual regulatory or market requirement. Having a third-party audit should motivate caretakers to have clear goals on-site and internal documentation to support their quality management (McGlone, 2004 [44]; Pairis-Garcia and Moeller, 2017[45]).

Although, this can be cost prohibited, an advisory committee provides outside eyes and direction. Before inviting persons to serve, ask yourself the following questions: (1) *what expertise do you wish to be represented?* Given that animal welfare science is multidisciplinary in nature, it is advisable to have individuals familiar with your species. It would be preferable to create your committee that includes a welfare expert, a veterinarian that has- or has recently practiced and a representative from your markets. 2) *What are the committee member expectations?* It is important that you clearly outline the committee duties and expectations. For example, do you want them to review assessment and audit scores and to provide advice on improvements? Do you want them to review and edit policies, SOP's and training material? Do you want them to complete on-farm third party audits?

Thorough investigation of internal and external allegations related to animal abuse and neglect

If you have implemented an on-farm welfare program including the areas discussed above, the investigation may be emotional and time will need to be dedicated, but you have many facets in place to attend quickly to internal and external allegations. The final component of any successful on-farm welfare program is the action plan on how an investigation will occur.

Here are elements that we think are important for a thorough investigation:

- ✓ If you have one, assemble your company's welfare team immediately
- ✓ Have an independent expert on-call that can be on-farm within 24-hours of the allegations to begin the independent investigation
- ✓ Communicate to your stakeholders; who are they, how can they be reached?
- ✓ Communicate to any media outlets; a statement that does not agree or disagree is encouraged. For example, *"The Company is shocked by these claims. We have a strong on-farm animal welfare program, and we have a zero tolerance for animal abuse and neglect. We have engaged our investigation team, and they are investigating these claims thoroughly. A final report will be made public to any and all interested parties at the investigation conclusion."*
- ✓ Identify the farm(s) that have been targeted; do you have all your farm identification numbers, and up to date supervisor or farm manager contact?
  - Identify all caretakers that work on the farm at the time of the allegation and interview each of them; there are no set questions but suggestions could include *"Please detail the animal welfare training you have received"* *"Have you signed the zero tolerance of abuse and neglect, and what is covered in that?"* *"Tell me how you report animal abuse and neglect on-farm?"*
  - Assess every animal, all records, SOP's, training and facility information on farm using your on-farm welfare program tool
  - Review performance and production information for the period of time that the allegation was made
  - Collect supporting documentation, for example previous internal and external assessments that have been done at the farm and training records
- ✓ Review the allegation documentation. This may be through videos, writing or some other medium. For videos, each frame needs to be paused. Write down every element from an



image and determine where on-farm this would have occurred. Provide in the report (a) the claim (b) the response backed up by educational guidelines or the law and (c) the expert opinion

- ✓ Write the report; add in supporting documentation and release. Supporting documentation could include all welfare program policies, training and caretaker certification, assessment, audit reports etc.
- ✓ Resolve: implement all findings and any action items from the report; this could be retraining, firing, adding new details to the on-farm welfare program etc.,

## Conclusion

In this review, we have provided many elements that we think should be included in an effective on-farm welfare program. The best advice is to start small and figure out logical steps. Seek out help and find resources that can be used and adapted. Remember, on-farm welfare program is fluid, training will be on going and communication is critical. Finally, by having your on-farm welfare program you have a platform to sell your success story as it relates to farm animal welfare.

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