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Calf Note #145 – A comment on calf welfare and the consumer

Introduction

On October 22, 2009, I made a presentation at the Cornell Nutrition Conference in Syracuse, NY. My presentation addressed an aspect of calf management that is an increasing concern to me. Specifically, rates of failure of passive transfer (**FPT**) in newborn calves are unacceptably high in the U.S. Subsequent calf morbidity and mortality has the potential to cast a negative light on our industry. Though much of the FPT is due to variation in colostrum quality, quantity and feeding practices; however, the conscious decision not to feed calves or to feed them inadequate amounts or quality colostrum contribute to FPT also.

Shortly after my presentation in Syracuse, news outlets reported that the USDA closed a slaughterhouse in Grand Isle, Vermont due to abuse of young calves during slaughter. The Humane Society of the US (**HSUS**), an animal rights organization, hired an undercover “investigator” to take hidden video of operations at the plant. The video documented clear animal abuse and violations of USDA rules which occurred in the presence of USDA inspectors. Videos were posted on the internet for the world to see. There were calls for tighter regulation of handling, transport and slaughter of “bob veal” calves. Senator Feinstein of California and others in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives have called for action against individuals and companies that violate existing regulations.

Our reputation as an industry is harmed by neglect and inhumane treatment of calves, whether at Bushway Packing or elsewhere. Though few consumers are directly involved in animal agriculture today, these consumers have expectations about the quality and safety of the food they consume. Increasingly, too, they have expectations about how the animals are cared for, transported, fed and handled. This “social contract”, though unwritten, is a critical part of the industry’s image to the consuming public.

What is a “social contract”? A social contract is the set of rules (written or unwritten) that we all agree to live and work by. For example, when we fly on a commercial airline, we assume that the pilots have been properly trained on how to fly the plane, they have adequate experience, the plane is functioning properly and the air traffic control system will direct the plane to arrive safely at its destination. Many of these rules are clearly defined in government regulations that dictate training schemes, maintenance of planes, etc.

When it comes to agriculture, there is a significant, though different, social contract. These rules are written at least to some degree, in government welfare, handling and transport regulations. Other

parts are unwritten but expected anyway. They're also subject to change. Consumers assume that food is safe, nutritious and wholesome. They expect animal products are from animals are raised, fed, housed, and managed to meet the animal's needs and the animals were treated humanely. That is, the animals were not abused, neglected or mistreated. Please note that this is my interpretation of the social contract; its interpretation may be quite different to different people.

When the social contract is violated, bad things happen. If consumers don't trust the safety or wholesomeness of food, they won't buy it. If they believe animal products are derived from mistreatment or abuse, they will demand changes in the way that animals are managed and cared for. Such is the case with the animal abuse in Vermont. Individuals responsible for the abuse at the facility had lost sight of their moral responsibility to handle these calves with care and restraint. Though the individuals involved will be punished, our industry will be punished as well. Our industry will be held responsible for the least of us; and it is up to our industry to raise the level of care to that expected by the public. If we don't take accept and act on responsibility ourselves, it will be imposed on us from the outside – whether by government regulation or by animal care guidelines set up by the animal rights lobby.

For example, in the press release announcing their video, HSUS announced that they would petition the USDA to impose new regulations to prohibit transport of calves less than 10 days of age. They want to force the industry to change to meet their more radical interpretation of this social contract. As an industry, we have to understand what the majority of the public expects of us (notwithstanding the vocal, radical element) and change how we do things so that we meet these expectations.

My opinion is that prohibiting transport of calves less than 10 days of age is a very bad idea. I believe this would risk increasing morbidity and mortality, not decreasing it. It would potentially harm more calves than it would help. Regulatory agencies should think long and hard about the implications of such a rule change before imposing it on the industry.

Calf ranch managers are excellent managers. They receive young animals and have developed the nutrition, management and biosecurity programs to minimize morbidity and mortality. Many calf raisers who routinely receive calves from 0-2 days of age maintain preweaning death losses less than 5%. This compares very favorably with the 7.8% preweaning mortality on dairy farms reported by the USDA.

Forcing calves to stay on dairies that don't possess the management skill or personnel to rear calves for the critical first 10 days of life could result in greater mortality, not less. Further, from an immunological perspective, calves are quite susceptible do enteric disease during the period of 7-10 days of age. Moving calves at this sensitive time would be stressful on the animals and would potentially increase the risk of transmitting the disease to many other animals.

The other potential violation of our social contract is the failure to feed colostrum to calves – especially those calves that will leave the farm to go to slaughter or to a calf ranch. There is no

excuse for this practice, regardless of the sex of the calf. Availability of maternal colostrum from the dam or other cow or colostrum supplement and replacer products makes it feasible and economical to provide immunoglobulins to newborns. That bull calves have no economic value is beside the point. The consumer expects that newborn calves will be treated humanely and given the greatest opportunity to avoid stress and disease. Dairy producers have an obligation to provide newborn calves with a source of colostrum.

The dairy industry has an excellent reputation for humane care of cows, heifers and calves. Milk, cheese, and ice cream are viewed as nutritious, safe and wholesome. But the industry will get a negative image if we can't take care of our calves.

To reiterate my point – as an industry, calf raisers and dairy producers share an obligation to properly care for our newborn calves. This includes humane feeding, handling and transport. It includes minimizing stress and clean, dry housing. And it includes feeding a source of IgG to provide passive immunity. These obligations exist whether the calf stays on the dairy, moves to a calf ranch or goes to slaughter. When we violate these obligations, we risk having regulations imposed on us from government or from those to whom we sell our products. If not the FDA, it may be McDonald's that imposes management on us. It would be much better if we took a more proactive approach and got our "house in order" without outside intervention – and not simply to avoid outside regulations or rules, but because it is the right thing to do.

Finally, this is a reminder that the views and opinions expressed in this Calf Note are mine alone.

Written by Dr. Jim Quigley (27 December 2009)
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