

Animal Care and Welfare is Always a Priority

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Pork producers for generations have provided excellent husbandry and care to pigs, knowing that they will be rewarded by their own satisfaction and improved production from the animals. Additionally, I hope that at least part of the reason all of us are involved in the production of pigs is that we enjoy working with these animals, even if they can be difficult and test our patience at times.

However, our customers (consumers) and the public in general are increasingly demanding we demonstrate and document that we raise pigs in a humane manner. Isolated occurrences recently of animal abuse, along with rhetoric from activist groups, have caused our public to increasingly distrust animal agriculture. Additionally, because our public and consumer base is more and more detached from having any background of farming, current production methods, such as the use of individual stalls for housing sows, is being questioned. So how do we go about ensuring the highest level of animal care is always occurring, and how do we demonstrate this to our customers? Here are some guidelines to consider:

Make animal care and welfare a priority on your operation(s)

This is sometimes easier said than done, but animal care needs to be the top priority on the farm and in the barn. How do we create the “culture of animal care”? Lead by example – words are not sufficient, it is truly the actions that managers and owners take that are observed and influence everyone else. If someone observes questionable or improper handling occurring, this information needs to be relayed forward to management or ownership so that corrective actions can be taken. Have a positive attitude towards handling and caring for animals. Finally, conduct all activities as if you were being filmed by someone – if you are uncertain whether or not you should be doing an activity, you probably shouldn't.

Allow extra time when moving or handling pigs

Sometimes in the hectic day-to-day shuffle of raising pigs and trying to complete all tasks that need to occur, we can cut corners and be hasty with the “care” portion of animal care. Perhaps pigs aren't moving as fast as we would like, or a sow just stepped on your toe. Even at these challenging times, everyone in the barn needs to remember that animal care and welfare is a top priority. If you are “hot and bothered”, it is perhaps not the ideal time to be moving or handling pigs.

Develop an Animal Welfare Policy for your operation

Establishing an Animal Welfare Program for your operation will help ensure that animal welfare is a priority, that everyone working on the farm understands their responsibilities regarding animal welfare, and that the highest level of animal care occurs all the time from everyone. Components of an Animal Welfare Program should include company philosophy regarding animal welfare and abuse, a definition of what animal abuse is, instructions for how to report abuse incidents, and consequences for not following the policy.

Become individually certified in the PQA+ and TQA programs

The Pork Quality Assurance Plus (PQA+) program is a short certification program that covers pork food safety and animal welfare, and how on-farm procedures can affect these items. Transport Quality Assurance (TQA) is a similar type of program that focuses on animal handling and care, and impacts on animal welfare as well as final pork quality. By participating in these programs, individuals become certified for 3 years and demonstrate their commitment to animal welfare as well as food safety and quality. More information on both programs is available at the National Pork Board website at www.pork.org.

Have a PQA Plus site assessment conducted at your site(s)

Additionally, production sites can be certified by having a PQA+ advisor conduct an assessment on the farm. The advisor will review records and observe animals as well as facilities and equipment and provide recommendations on how to continually improve animal care.

Being aware of the importance of animal welfare for your farm, as well as our entire industry, is the first step. Developing an animal welfare policy and creating a culture of animal care are important steps towards ensuring and demonstrating that the highest level of animal care and welfare always occurs on your farm. Look for tools and additional information to become available over the next year for our industry. In the mean time, you can view a webcast our group sponsored that was presented by National Pork Board entitled “Creating an Animal Welfare Program” to get more ideas – it is free to view and is at our PorkCast website at www.extension.umn.edu/swine/porkcast.