

Animal Welfare and exports

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For centuries, humans have wrestled with the morality and purpose of slaughtering animals for food and other products. Religious involvement in the process has taken many forms: however all recognise it as a deliberate and solemn process, one that should not be taken lightly. Downstream, the benefits of good welfare practice on meat quality are of secondary importance but add weight to the drive for improvement in this area.

From an international perspective, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) has taken a leadership role in the development of animal welfare guidelines and standards. The 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, which established the European Community, addressed the status of animals in its annexed protocol on the Protection and Welfare of Animals. The protocol recognised that animals should be considered sentient beings and therefore had status in the EC.

Much has changed since philosopher René Decartes made the statement "Cogito ergo sum" translated "I think, therefore I am", surmising that because animals "don't think" they were simply animate objects incapable of experiencing feelings like humans.

Animal Welfare in New Zealand

New Zealand's animal welfare system is among the best in the world. However because of the potential impact on major export industries the definition and understanding of acceptable and unacceptable animal welfare continues to evolve. In December 2010 the Minister of Agriculture asked MAF to review existing legislation and start developing a national strategy.

Currently, international trade rules do not allow discrimination of trade on the basis of animal welfare but the pressure that is mounting within New Zealand's trading community on the issue of animal welfare good practice makes the formal rule somewhat meaningless. Restaurant and supermarket chains reflect public concern about animal welfare in the pressure they place on the suppliers of animal products. There is little doubt that high standards of animal welfare and robust animal welfare legislation will enhance New Zealand's reputation as a producer and exporter. A number of Codes of Welfare have flowed out of the animal welfare legislation and these clearly describe good practice when it comes to the treatment of animals in New Zealand. Compliance and enforcement of the legislation has seen most of the major companies involved in animal products undertaking reviews of their own animal welfare practices.

The Five Freedoms

Animal welfare legislation in New Zealand is, by definition, broad and general, providing a framework for individuals and organisations. It promotes the internationally accepted Five (5) Freedoms and allows for Codes of Welfare to be developed which provide the detail in areas of animal-human interaction.

The Five Freedoms, in no particular order are:

- Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition
- Freedom from discomfort
- Freedom from pain, injury and disease



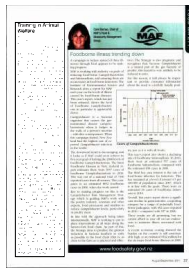
Dr Jim Edwards assists Teremoana Ngu of Alliance Lorneville with online assessment

- Freedom to express normal behaviour
- Freedom from fear and distress

The Codes of Welfare provide the detail for each recognised animal/human interaction, but of particular relevance to the meat processing industry is the Code of Welfare for Commercial Slaughter which has only recently been signed off by the Minister of Agriculture.

The new Code of Welfare for Commercial Slaughter requires that slaughter plant personnel are competent and have received appropriate training. The Code means New Zealand's meat exports are well-positioned because the animal welfare practises it promotes are well accepted by our export markets.

A clear thread through legislation and the Codes of Welfare is the concept of competency: competency of those who own and/or are responsible for animals. Competency assessment is not simply a reflection of 'years of experience', it relates to recognised training and educational programmes legitimised by independent scrutiny and oversight.



Training in Animal Welfare

Animal physiology and anatomy have significant impacts on the status of animal welfare in the industry. They dictate the behaviour of the live animal and also explain species-specific behavioural characteristics that impact on design and operation of good handling facilities. In terms of the actual slaughter process, knowledge of physiology and anatomy on the part of operators is of major importance when ensuring humaneness. Workshop participants are exposed to the science and technology that underpins animal welfare in the meat processing environment.

Since 2004, Achieve Enterprises Limited (AEL) of Palmerston North, has been providing training in the animal welfare area to the meat processing industry. The training targets not only animal handlers but supervisory and administrative groups as well.

AEL's programme focuses on requirements and practises from live animal handling through to and including slaughter. Additionally the workshop considers ritual slaughter, primarily Halal (Islamic) because of its importance to New Zealand meat exports, but also other techniques like Kosher (Jewish) which has relevance to New Zealand society generally.

Presenters, Ross Davies and Jim Edwards of AEL provide the training over two intensive days of workshop activity. An explanation of the requirements outlined in the new Code of Welfare for Commercial Slaughter is a central component of the programme. Highlights of the workshop are the practical sessions where participants are asked to audit actual meat plant facilities and identify features and problems that may be evident.

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) provides oversight of the outcomes of this training in the form of Unit Standard registration. Learning outcomes and assessment activities are closely monitored and moderated by NZQA though the New Zealand Industry Training Organisation (NZITO) as the ITO responsible for the sector.

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