

### **ANIMAL WELFARE CHALLENGES: ASSESSING YOUR CURRENT ANIMAL WELFARE PROGRAM**

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Current data suggests that producers that initiate strong Animal Welfare (AW) programs have better quality products and increased productivity. In other words, comprehensive AW programs make good business sense and drive profits. But exactly how do you minimize risk within your company by focusing on AW? It starts with acknowledging your weaknesses and turning them into your strengths.

2013 proved to be another year of major attacks on the poultry and meat production industry from activist movements and organizations. We have now seen attacks on layer operations, turkey producers, broilers producers, and commercial hatcheries. Consumers and retailers continue to demand more AW verification and training on farms and in production facilities. It is up to you to meet these demands head on and gain more leverage with your retailers.

But look at the bright side - with every challenge comes opportunity. Several companies are taking positive steps forward with their AW programs; but the negative actions of one organization in your industry can affect all producers. As a result, it is important for the industry to embrace the opportunities available, to share ideas regarding AW with one another, and to educate the consumer.

Retailers must protect their brand and will go to whatever means necessary to do so. The problem is that some retailers have no true understanding of the daily challenges faced by producers, and in most cases, no understanding of what it takes to produce your products. Education is extremely important and producers are the experts. The industry should be telling the true story instead of leaving it to the animal activist groups to do so.

It is interesting to note the number of hourly employees that believe negative myths about the production facilities they actually work for, probably because no one has taken the time to educate them or to set up continuous training programs internally. AW is not something that can be ignored any longer. It is a serious issue in the industry today and is only gaining more interest from the consumer. Producers should have nothing to hide and should be proud of the internal AW programs they have, as well as the quality of their products.

At this point you are probably asking yourself, "how will I know that I have control of my AW program?" It's a simple 4 step process:

**Step one - Commitment.** From the CEO to middle management to the plant and barn workers, every person must be familiar with, and conversant in, AW. Talk about your AW program with employees, allied industries, trucking firms, feed companies, pharmaceutical companies, retailers, consumers, the public, and animal rights groups.

**Step two - Implement a total program.** This could include dozens to hundreds of SOPs related to animal care such as HR pre-screening, the continuous assessment of anyone that handles animals, documented training, intensive internal auditing, corrective actions, and the documentation of corrective actions.

**Step three - Have a comprehensive third-party audit.** High-quality third-party audits should be science-based, statistically sound, peer reviewed, and should include all AW measures. Also, be sure that the auditors you engage are PAACO certified with prior experience in the production industry. No one should be auditing your farms and operations if they don't understand AW and have never worked in the field.

**Step four - Assess and improve your production practices.** Continuous assessment and improvement of science-based and perception-based production practices could include housing systems, handling practices, treatment of ill animals, and euthanasia procedures.

So what is the take home message to all of this? You should perform a 'self-reflection' about your soft spots and focus on the education of your production employees. Seek out and engage an accredited auditing, online training and certification firm. Gaining control of your AW program will minimize or eliminate risks and will increase the quality of your products, your profitability, and the value and trust behind your brand.