

# Dairy Processor's Role in Promoting Animal Welfare

## Warren Skippon

Saputo, 6869 boul. Métropolitain E, St-Léonard, QC H1P 1X8  
Email: warren.skippon@saputo.com

### ■ Take Home Messages

- ▶ As an important stakeholder in the dairy value chain, dairy processors have a fundamental interest in animal welfare assurance.
- ▶ The processing industry has become fully engaged in ongoing development of animal care Codes of Practice/Standards and the assessment programs that provide compliance assurance.
- ▶ Recent high profile cruelty incidents in Canada and the USA have been 'game-changers' for the industry as a whole and in particular for dairy processors. Despite the negative media attention, such events do bring positive change, especially in Canada:
  - Stronger commitment to Code compliance and animal care assessment to mitigate risk of cruelty incidents from occurring.
  - Recognition of the need to develop policy and protocols to address cruelty incidents in order to maintain customer and consumer confidence.
- ▶ Key welfare issues on the Canadian horizon from the processor's viewpoint:
  - Animal care assessment – need to have a robust program that provides assurance to meet industry, customer and consumer expectations.
  - Industry needs to address some specific welfare challenges:
    - Elimination of tail docking.
    - Pain control for routine management procedures.
    - Animal handling training, Codes of Conduct.
    - End of life decision-making, cull cow transport.

## ■ Saputo's Heightened Involvement in Animal Welfare

Saputo is a Canadian-based dairy processing company founded by an Italian immigrant family in post WWII Montreal in the 1950's. It has grown to a multi-national company with operations in Canada, USA, Australia and Argentina. The company has >12,000 employees in 55 plants and is one of the top processors in the world and the largest in Canada.

Like most animal product food processing companies, Saputo has an animal welfare policy posted on its corporate website. The original policy was quite general, stating that the 'company shares industry and society's concerns about animal welfare', and that Saputo 'appreciates animal welfare standards and practices are required, and expect our suppliers to adopt proper animal care methods.'

In June of 2014, an animal cruelty incident occurred on a large dairy farm in Chilliwack, British Columbia. The animal rights activist group Mercy for Animals revealed undercover video evidence of farm employees abusing dairy cows (beaten, kicked, dragged, etc.) at the entrance to the rotary milking parlour. An animal protection enforcement investigation was conducted and criminal charges were recommended. This case brought on a torrent of negative traditional and social media outcry. Saputo was targeted by activists suggesting this incident occurred on a "Saputo farm" and that the company has control of on-farm animal welfare. A Change.org petition was started demanding that Saputo "*stop supporting horrific animal abuse*", and urged consumers to stop buying Saputo products until "*it does the right thing*". As has happened in other similar cruelty incidents, major multinational companies and their brands will be targeted also. This results in loss of market as customers cannot accept products made from milk where such incidents have occurred until producer reintegration steps have been taken. This was a 'game-changing' moment for our company and for the processing industry. It was clear that Saputo would need to develop a proactive policy that focused on a protocol to deal with cruelty incidents and also with compliance with animal care Codes of Practice/Standards.

## ■ Saputo's Animal Welfare Policy

Saputo has developed a new global animal welfare policy appropriate for all jurisdictions (the company has operations in Can, USA, Aus and Arg). The goal was to have a policy that is progressive and shows industry leadership in dairy cattle welfare. It was launched in June 2015 (Saputo Animal Welfare Policy, 2015).

The policy is based on the following principles:

- ▶ Animal welfare is a 'pre-competitive' issue – similar to food safety.
- ▶ Policy is science-based and aligned with recognized national care and handling Codes/Standards and assessment programs.

The policy has two key elements:

- ▶ **Zero tolerance for any act of cruelty:** When Saputo is presented with credible evidence to support an allegation of animal cruelty, milk receiving is suspended until an animal protection enforcement investigation is conducted and an independent veterinary welfare audit has been performed.
- ▶ **Compliance with recognized national Codes/Standards for proper animal care and handling:** In Canada, this is the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle* (NFACC, 2009). In the USA, it is the National Milk Producers Federation *Farmers Assuring Responsible Management (FARM)* program (National Milk Producers Federation). Compliance must include appropriate animal handling training and an animal care agreement (Code of Conduct).

## ■ Processor's View of Key Welfare Issues on the Horizon

- I. **Animal Care Assessment:** Processors are looking forward to the full implementation of the animal care module of proAction® to provide assurance of compliance with Codes/Standards (DFC, 2015). A robust assessment program is key to meeting industry expectations and maintaining trust in the dairy sector. Such programs must mature to a format that incorporates validation by a third party audit/verification to meet the expectations of industry, customers and consumers.

Veterinarians will play a key role in helping producers understand Code compliance, prepare for assessments and follow-up on any corrective actions necessary to maintain compliance (e.g. lameness identification/treatment/prevention, euthanasia protocols, cull cow transport decision-making).

- II. **Addressing Specific Industry Welfare Challenges:** Our industry needs to commit to addressing some specific management practices and animal care/handling issues that present ongoing challenges to welfare and risk eroding consumer and social trust.

- a. Tail docking – The practice of tail docking cattle must be eliminated. It has been performed based on the assumption that it will decrease the risk of udder infections, contribute to cleaner cows and improve the working conditions of those handling dairy cows. Scientific evidence has not identified any difference in udder or leg hygiene, somatic cell count or prevalence of intramammary infections (Tucker et al., 2001). Welfare concerns include pain or discomfort, risk of neuroma formation and post-operative infections and loss of ability to control flies (Eicher et al., 2006). The Canadian, American and Australian veterinary medical associations all oppose the routine tail docking of cattle.
- b. Pain control for disbudding/dehorning – The use of pain control (appropriate anesthesia and analgesia) when disbudding or dehorning cattle must become a minimum industry standard. The prevention of horn growth by genetic selection and breeding or polled stock is achievable, but polled dairy sire selection is currently very limited. Where genetic selection for polled stock is not an option, calves should be disbudded in preference to dehorning using anesthesia and post-operative analgesia (Stafford and Mellor, 2005; Stewart et al., 2009). The Canadian, American and Australian veterinary medical associations all recommend the use of pain control for disbudding and dehorning of dairy cattle.
- c. Animal handling training – All those that handle dairy cattle should be appropriately trained in quiet cattle handling methods using a recognized training program. Quiet handling methods reduce fear, avoid injury, make observation and treatment easier and enhance animal well-being and productivity. Animal handling training must include education on non-ambulatory cow care and proper use of electric prods. Prods should only be used in extreme situations (never on sensitive areas, e.g. face, udder, genitalia).

Every person who handles or comes into contact with an animal should sign a cow care agreement (Code of Conduct). Such agreements provide everyone on the farm with a clear understanding of farm policies and highlight the importance of appropriate animal care. They provide an understanding of:

- i. farm owner and employees' commitment to doing the right thing, and outlines what must happen when things go wrong
  - ii. protocol that must be followed if any person witnesses an act of animal abuse, mistreatment or mishandling
- d. End of life decision-making, cull cow transport – The dairy industry is not often associated with the slaughter of animals, and as a result cull cow welfare, until recently, has remained out of the

spotlight. There are ongoing concerns with poor decision-making resulting in the transport of unfit cull dairy cows and veal calves to auction markets (e.g. severe lameness, emaciation, weak/dehydrated calves). Many such animals are either euthanized or sent back to the farm of origin. The dairy industry needs to address this welfare concern by educating all involved in the marketing chain (producers, drovers, veterinarians, auction market owners/employees):

- i. Producers must understand the complex marketing pathways that cull cows often face. The cows spend an average of 7-9 days in transit until they are slaughtered. Many producers believe when they ship a cow for beef they are slaughtered the next day!
- ii. There needs to be education/training on recognizing animals that are compromised (e.g. cow with LDA + dehydration) and unfit for transport (e.g. severe lameness).
- iii. Producers need help developing SOPs for cull cow and calf transport using established decision trees. Market chain stakeholders need to understand and implement alternative marketing options for compromised cull cows that require special handling (e.g. local slaughter, 'direct to slaughter' at auction market, on-farm slaughter).

The dairy processors are engaged with other stakeholders in the dairy value chain as we all move forward on the path of advancing animal welfare. We must all be working toward robust animal welfare assurance provided through an animal care assessment program that validates compliance with the Code of Practice in order to maintain customer and consumer confidence and trust.

## ■ References

- Dairy Farmers of Canada proAction® Animal Care Module. 2015. Available at: <http://www.dairyfarmers.ca/proaction/resources/animal-care>.
- Eicher, S.D., H.W. Cheng, A.D. Sorrells, and M.M. Shutz. 2006. Short communication: Behavioral and physiological indicators of sensitivity or chronic pain following tail docking. *J Dairy Sci.* 89:3047-3051.
- National Farm Animal Care Council Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle. 2009. Available at: <https://www.nfacc.ca/codes-of-practice/dairy-cattle/code>.
- National Milk Producers Federation FARM (Farmers Assuring Responsible Management) Program. Available at: <http://www.nationaldairyfarm.com/animal-care-program>.

- Saputo Animal Welfare Policy. 2015. Available at: <http://www.saputo.com/uploadedFiles/Saputo/shared/social/Animal%20welfare%20policy.pdf>
- Stafford, K.J. and D.J. Mellor. 2005. Dehorning and disbudding distress and it's alleviation in calves. *Vet J.* 169:337-349.
- Stewart, M., J.M. Stookey, K.J. Stafford et al. 2009. Effects of local anesthetic and a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug on pain response of dairy calves to hot-iron dehorning. *J Dairy Sci.* 92:1512-1519.
- Tucker, C.B., D. Fraser, and D.M. Weary. 2001. Tail docking dairy cattle: Effects on cow cleanliness and udder health. *J Dairy Sci.* 84:84-87.





