

# Promoting Animal Welfare – An Industry Perspective

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## ■ **Take Home Messages**

- ▶ Animal care is essential on every dairy farm and is an integral part of daily life for every dairy farmer.
- ▶ Canadian dairy farmers have collectively agreed to develop and implement a national mandatory animal care program to demonstrate to consumers and customers how they care for their cattle.
- ▶ The Animal Care program is based on the *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle*, and is part of Dairy Farmers of Canada's proAction® Initiative.

## ■ **Introduction**

Consumers and customers are increasingly demanding assurance that the food they are buying is safe, wholesome and produced responsibly. Today, their demands have moved beyond the safety and quality of the product itself, to wanting evidence that the farmer, processor, retailer and/or food company can demonstrate in a credible way that they have valid and sustainable practices when they produce food.

Canadian dairy farmers have decided to show their sustainable practices and the progress they make on farms by developing nationally the proAction® Initiative. Building on the Canadian Quality Milk program, which farmers have implemented to show they address food safety risks on farms, proAction is being developed by farmers for farmers, with various experts involved, and is designed to be practical, effective and credible.

Animal Care and Livestock Traceability are the next priority areas of proAction to be implemented, with on-farm training having started in the fall of 2015. Every farmer knows that excellent cattle care is the foundation of a successful

dairy farm. Farmers strive to continuously improve the practices on their farms and they spend many hours every day with their animals: milking, feeding, and monitoring their health and wellness. With proAction, farmers will demonstrate and measure their commitment to best management practices and continuous improvement.

## ■ **ProAction Initiative**

Dairy Farmers of Canada's proAction Initiative provides assurance to customers about farm practices, integrating six modules under one umbrella:

- Milk Quality
- Food Safety (Canadian Quality Milk program)
- Animal Care
- Livestock Traceability
- Biosecurity
- Environment

Canadian dairy farmers' vision for proAction is to collectively demonstrate responsible stewardship of their animals and the environment, while sustainably producing high-quality, safe and nutritious food for consumers.

Each module of proAction is being developed and implemented in a staged approach so that farmers have adequate time to learn about the requirements and implement them on their farms.

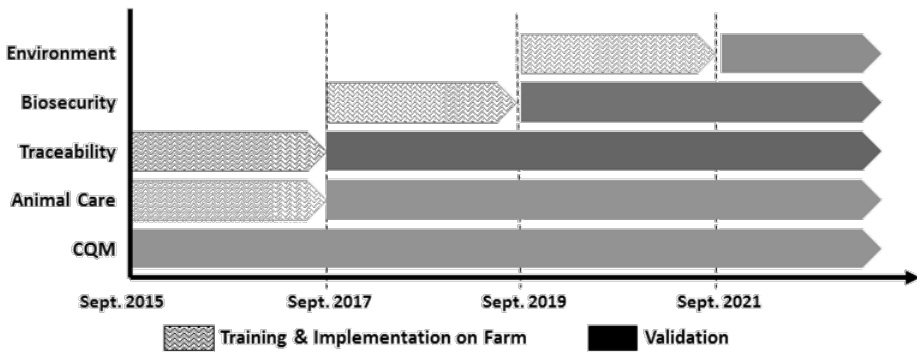
The final program materials for Animal Care and Livestock Traceability were published on September 1, 2015, in time to initiate the training and communication phase to farmers and stakeholders. Farmers have two years to learn about the programs, train staff and adjust their practices, as necessary, to meet the programs' expectations.

In September 2017, the Animal Care and Traceability requirements will be incorporated into the validation process. From September 2017 on, when farms are due for a Food Safety validation, their implementation of the Animal Care and Livestock Traceability requirements will be evaluated as well.

An on-farm pilot to test the draft requirements of the Biosecurity and Environment modules was started in early 2016. Dairy Farmers of Canada (DFC) is planning to start the training phase of the Biosecurity program in September 2017, and then incorporate Biosecurity into the validation process in September 2019.

The Environment will follow two years later, with training for farmers starting in September 2019, and then incorporation into the validation process in September 2021.

Figure 1 illustrates the timelines associated with the phases of each program.



**Figure 1: Development and implementation timelines for proAction**

▪ **Animal Care Program**

**Background**

Canadian dairy farmers have been investing in research to support the development of science-based practices to continuously improve the care of dairy cattle for almost two decades. In 2009, the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) and DFC published “*The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle*” (hereby referred to as the “Code of Practice”). The Code of Practice is a national guideline that outlines best management practices and requirements for dairy farmers related to animal care. The Code of Practice is science-based.

In 2010, DFC co-financed a major research project under the Dairy Research Cluster that was designed to measure and benchmark animal comfort on Canadian dairy farms and develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) to help farmers measure the status of their cows' comfort.<sup>1</sup>

Using the outcomes of this research, DFC participated in a NFACC project to pilot the Animal Care Assessment Framework, which is a process that outlines how to translate the requirements of a Code of Practice into an auditable, on-farm, animal care program. The project involved a small pilot on dairy farms to test the program requirements and their practical application.

<sup>1</sup> Animal Comfort Tool, <https://www.dairyresearch.ca/animal-comfort-tool.php>

DFC then revised the program according to the feedback and launched a second, larger pilot on dairy farms across the country. Farmers provided excellent feedback, and commented that the program helped them identify which areas they were addressing well and which areas needed greater focus. Once this pilot was completed, DFC finalized the program requirements, and presented the final program to its General Council during the DFC Annual General Meeting in July 2015. The General Council approved the program.

## **Requirements**

The Animal Care program is based on the requirements outlined in the Code of Practice, and, as such, it is designed to assess a dairy farm's level of compliance to the Code of Practice. The main areas the Animal Care program addresses are: dairy facilities (e.g. housing design, bedding, and space), feed and water, animal health, handling and shipping animals, and staff training and communication.

The Animal Care program contains animal-based measures to assess the welfare of dairy cattle: records, such as SOPs, to demonstrate that certain procedures are documented and followed consistently by staff, and other best management practices such as housing design and cattle handling.

The animal-based measures are a key component of the program with solid foundations in scientific research financed by Canadian dairy farmers. Cattle are assessed for body condition score, injuries and lameness. These measurements are indicators of facility design, barn management, feeding practices, and health status of the individual animals. The initial assessment will be used as a benchmark for the farm, so that the farmer can identify opportunities for improvement. The assessment report will also show the farm how its results compare to other farms. Future assessments will provide farmers with the ability to measure and track their herds' status over time, and strive for continuous improvement.

## **Implementation**

DFC launched the training phase of the Animal Care program and Livestock Traceability on September 1, 2015. DFC distributed materials to provincial organizations to enable them to implement their training plans with farmers. Provincial organizations will deliver the program directly to farmers, as they do with the Food Safety program.

The program materials are available on the proAction website: [www.dairyfarmers.ca/proAction](http://www.dairyfarmers.ca/proAction) (click on "Resources" and then click on the Animal Care icon to find the Farmer Manual). Provincial associations

are offering workshops or other forms of training to farmers to learn about the program and to learn how to implement it on their farms.

In September 2017, DFC will launch the validation phase of the program, and the requirements will be integrated in the Food Safety program, and become mandatory elements for continued registration.

## ■ Conclusion

Animal care is an essential element on every dairy farm. The Animal Care element of proAction is based on the requirements outlined in the *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle*. DFC's goals with the Animal Care program are to provide recognition to those farmers who are doing an excellent job of caring for their dairy cattle, and to encourage farmers to strive for continuous improvement in animal care.



