



Animal Welfare Institute

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FARM Animal Care Task Force
Animal Health & Well-Being Committee
National Milk Producers Federation

Re: Version 5.0 FARM Animal Care Standards

On behalf of the staff and supporters of the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), we wish to submit comments on Version 5 of the FARM Animal Care standards. Although we understand that the public comment period for Version 5 has not yet begun, we believe that information gleaned through recent consumer perception surveys commissioned by AWI, as well as our recommendations, will be helpful for NMPF to consider before the draft revisions are finalized.

We offer the following recommendations for how Version 5 can improve upon current standards to maximize the welfare of dairy cattle. The *Animal Care Reference Manual Version 4 2020-2022* states, “As science and best practices evolve alongside public attitudes and perceptions, the dairy industry must continue to show customers and consumers that we’re holding ourselves to the highest standards of animal care.” To achieve this goal, NMPF must take into consideration the most recent research and welfare standards adopted by international bodies, such as the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH), to ensure FARM’s standards are meaningful, defensible, and up-to-date.

Facilities

Housing of Pre-weaned Calves

Version 4 of the FARM Animal Care standards requires that “[a]ll age classes of animals have housing that allows for the ability to easily stand up, lie down, adopt normal resting postures and have visual contact with other cattle without risk of injury.”

Recommendation: We ask that FARM, given the benefits of group/social housing of calves and the relatively few, if any, benefits of individual housing, begin requiring a transition toward social housing. This could be achieved by including a standard requiring at least paired housing for calves, enforceable through a Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP). Alternatively, it could be included as a standard without enforcement mechanism in Version 5 and upgraded to a CIP in the next iteration of FARM’s standards in order to give producers time to adjust their operations.

Rationale: It is clear from FARM’s *Calf Care & Quality Assurance Animal Care Reference Manual* that the program recognizes the benefits of social housing for calves. The biological benefits include, but are not limited to, increased intake of solid feed and body weight gain, especially during the pre-weaning phase.¹ Further benefits include calves exhibiting less fearfulness and greater ability to adjust and cope with novel situations.² Concerns about cross

suckling and disease transfer that usually justify individual calf housing can be mitigated by changing the management practices related to colostrum administration, space, nutritional management, staff training, and provision of slow-flow teat buckets or other means of suckling.^{3,4}

It is for these reasons that WOAHA allows individual calf housing only for “very young calves,” and recommends that “replacement stock should then be reared in groups ... of similar age and physical size.”⁵ Additionally, the Dairy Cattle Welfare Council recommends social housing in pairs or groups, starting from 1-4 days of age.⁶

Consumers are also skeptical of individual calf housing. In a public survey on common dairy industry practices commissioned by AWI in July 2022 (see Attachment 1), 49% of consumers indicated it was “totally unacceptable” to house calves individually for the first several months of their lives without contact with other calves; a further 16% found it “somewhat unacceptable.” Additionally, 36% of consumers surveyed indicated they were “much less likely” to purchase a dairy product if they learned that it came from a cow who, as a calf, was housed individually with no ability to socialize with other calves. A further 38% stated they were “somewhat less likely” to purchase the product.

Outdoor Exercise Requirement

Version 4 of the standards states that “all age classes of animals have a method of daily exercise (weather permitting, if outdoors).” However, this standard is only a suggestion and lacks any enforcement mechanism. Also, as worded, the standard indicates that outdoor access is not required.

Recommendation: AWI recommends the following standard: “All age classes of animals are permitted outdoor exercise daily, weather permitting. The outdoor area provides a smooth, natural walking surface with limited concrete or asphalt.” We also recommend that this standard be one that triggers a Mandatory Corrective Action Plan (MCAP) or, at minimum, a CIP if unmet. If FARM declines to require outdoor access, it should at the very least make the current daily exercise requirement enforceable through an MCAP.

Rationale: Science is clear about the benefits of exercise and outdoor access for cows, especially those that are primarily confined to stanchions or tie stalls. Studies have shown that dairy cattle welfare is “significantly better” in tie-stall operations that allow exercise than those that do not⁷ because the expression of natural behaviors is severely impaired by tie stalls.⁸ For this reason, the WOAHA Animal Welfare and Dairy Cattle Production Systems standards provide that “cows kept in tie stall housing should be allowed sufficient untethered exercise to prevent welfare problems” and warn that producers “should be aware of the higher risks of welfare problems where cattle are tethered.”⁹ Tie stall and stanchion housing also prevent cows from engaging in important social interaction with other cows.¹⁰

Continuous or near-continuous confinement of dairy cattle is contrary to what consumers approve of or expect. The ability of dairy cattle to interact socially is perceived by consumers as the most important factor for ensuring their welfare.¹¹ According to AWI’s July 2022 survey, 52% of consumers indicated that housing cows for a majority of the time in tie-stalls was totally

unacceptable, and another 19% found it somewhat unacceptable. When asked the same question about stanchions, 56% said the practice was totally unacceptable, and 16% said it was somewhat unacceptable. Also, 56% of consumers indicated it was totally unacceptable and 16% indicated it was somewhat unacceptable for a producer to never provide cows kept in tie stalls or stanchions an opportunity to exercise. Finally, 40% of consumers stated they were much less likely to purchase a dairy product if they learned that it came from a cow confined to a tie stall or stanchion without release for exercise or socialization, while 34% stated they were somewhat less likely to purchase the product.

Although daily exercise is essential, access to the outdoors is also important—it is associated with lower mortality of tied cattle, decreased prevalence of injuries, and fewer treatments for bloat.¹² To ensure that the standard is successful in enhancing animal health and welfare, we recommend adding a minimum exercise period, along with provisions that address the quality of the outdoor area. Outdoor surfaces made from hard materials, such as concrete or asphalt, negate many of the benefits of outdoor exercise.¹³

Finally, constant confinement and lack of outdoor access are contrary to what consumers approve of or expect. Research demonstrates that consumers express an increase in willingness to pay for cheese from cows with pasture access.¹⁴ According to AWI's survey, 56% of consumers stated that a failure to allow cows access to the outdoors was totally unacceptable, while an additional 17% called it somewhat unacceptable. When asked if they would purchase a dairy product after learning that it came from a cow with no access to the outdoors, 40% indicated they would be much less likely, and 34% answered that they would be somewhat less likely.

Pain Relief

Disbudding/Dehorning

Version 4 of the standards requires that “all calves are disbudded before 8 weeks of age,” which is enforceable through an MCAP, and that “pain mitigation for disbudding is provided,” enforceable through a CIP.

Recommendation: “All calves are disbudded before 8 weeks of age, and pain mitigation is provided during and after disbudding.” AWI also recommends that the requirement for pain management for disbudding be elevated to an MCAP if unmet.

Rationale: There is no question that disbudding, regardless of method, is significantly painful for calves and can cause acute and long-lasting pain regardless of the calf's age.¹⁵ FARM recognizes this fact in its manuals. However, despite Version 4 standards requiring pain management for disbudding, a recent study indicates that use of analgesia for dehorning or disbudding is low. A 2021 survey by Coetzee et al. of cattle veterinarians and producers (both beef and dairy industry) found that, of producers that dehorn or disbud¹⁶ calves under 2 months of age, 52% report “never” using local analgesia, and 58% report never using systemic analgesia, such as NSAIDs.¹⁷

Consumers also expect that pain mitigation be provided. In a survey commissioned by AWI in June 2022 regarding common physical alterations in farm animals (see Attachment 2), 81% of consumers find it “very” or “somewhat” important that pain relief be provided when disbudding

or dehorning cattle.¹⁸ Further, as to whether they would purchase a food product if they learned it came from an animal that had significantly painful procedures performed without pain relief, 31% stated they were much less likely, and 43% stated they were somewhat less likely.¹⁹ In order for producers to meet the expectations of consumers, holistic pain relief must be both required and enforced.

Castration

Version 4 of the standards provides that “pain mitigation for castration is provided in accordance with the signed protocol by the Veterinarian of Record,” but enforcement of the standard is not required.

Recommendation: AWI recommends that this standard be enforceable through an MCAP, or a CIP at minimum.

Rationale: It is widely recognized that castration, like disbudding, is a significantly painful procedure. Accordingly, the American Association of Bovine Practitioners encourages providing pain management during all castration procedures, regardless of the animal’s age. In the 2021 Coetzee et al. survey, however, the results were similar to those regarding disbudding: 62% of producers who castrate calves under two months of age said they never use local analgesia, and 71% said they never use systemic analgesia (e.g., NSAIDs).²⁰

Again, consumers expect pain mitigation to be provided. According to AWI’s June 2022 survey, 83% indicated it was “very” or “somewhat” important that pain relief be provided when castrating cattle.

Branding

Version 4 of the standards states that “pain mitigation for branding is provided in accordance with the signed protocol by the Veterinarian of Record,” but enforcement of the standard is not required.

Recommendation: “Freeze or hot iron branding are used only when required by law. When used, short- and long-term pain mitigation is provided in accordance with the signed protocol by the Veterinarian of Record.” The requirement should be enforced, at minimum, through a CIP.

Rationale: Version 4 acknowledges that branding is painful in the short and long term regardless of the use of pain relief. Accordingly, Version 4 encourages the “least invasive method of identification be used” and that freeze and hot iron branding are avoided where alternative identification methods exist.” Because there are readily available, less invasive alternatives to branding, FARM should require that those methods be used unless branding is required by law.

Other Standards

Fitness for Transport

Currently, Version 4 of the standards requires only that the producer has a written protocol that defines eligibility of animals for fitness to transport. While FARM provides guidance on factors affecting fitness in its care manuals, these are nonmandatory and unenforceable.

Recommendation: AWI recommends that FARM develop specific requirements for fitness to travel, rather than merely requiring a written protocol. Specifically, FARM should adopt the international fitness-to-transport requirements from Chapter 7.3: Transport of Animals by Land of WOA's *Terrestrial Animal Health Code*.²¹ Transport is a time when calves and cull cattle are particularly vulnerable to severe deteriorations in welfare, particularly when they face journeys longer than their physiologic condition permits.

Rationale: calves

Studies have reported a strong negative correlation between a cow's age at transport and mortality. Calves often die within a few weeks after transport from secondary infections resulting from lowered immune system function caused by transport stress.²² Stressors include handling during loading/unloading and thermal stress from environmental conditions, which are further exacerbated by hunger and dehydration.²³

Infection of the navel or umbilicus is one of the main causes of calf mortality within the first three weeks after transport.²⁴ Accordingly, regulations concerning animal welfare, including those adopted by WOA, use calf age or stage of navel healing as an indicator of fitness to travel. Specifically, to be fit, calves must be at least 3 weeks old—the approximate time required for the umbilicus to heal—before they are transported off the farm. Dairy consumers are also cognizant of the welfare issues of transporting young calves. In AWI's July 2022 survey, 64% of consumers answered that it was “totally” or “somewhat” unacceptable for young calves to be transported off the farm before 3 weeks of age without their mothers.

If FARM declines to adopt WOA fitness-to-travel standards, it should create, at the very least, a standard stating that calves under 3 weeks of age are unfit to transport and make such a standard enforceable by an MCAP.

Rationale: cull cows

Cows are culled due to low milk production, poor fertility, or a number of health issues that have major implications for fitness to travel, such as mastitis and lameness. Currently, there is little financial incentive for producers to refrain from transporting compromised dairy cattle, so the practice is common.²⁵ One study showed that cull cows spend an average of 82 hours in transport between farm and slaughter, usually suffering from painful conditions and with limited access to food and water.²⁶ For cows in already weakened states, this is a serious welfare issue. Adopting strong standards for fitness to travel and on-farm euthanizing of cattle unfit for transport will mean fewer cows languish in the marketing system.

Emergency Preparedness

Version 4 of the standards requires that each facility have “a written emergency action/crisis plan to effectively manage emergencies or crises that may occur.”

Recommendation 1: In order to maximize preparedness, FARM should require written emergency plans or protocols for specific common emergencies or events. First, a detailed plan should be required for the care of cows during extreme weather events that includes provision of

food, water (including the location of an emergency water source), and adequate shelter for cows and calves housed outdoors.

Rationale: Though some deaths from adverse weather are unavoidable, every precaution should be taken to ensure that dairy cattle—calves, in particular—are safe from extreme weather events. This is especially important, as extreme weather events are likely to become more frequent as climate change progresses. According to AWI’s July 2022 survey, 51% of consumers think it is totally unacceptable, and 18% think it is “somewhat” unacceptable for a calf to be housed individually in hutches outdoors in extreme weather.

Recommendation 2: Producers should be required to prepare an emergency plan specifically for barn fires. AWI also recommends that FARM require producers to adopt preventative measures to reduce the risk of barn fires. *NFPA 150: Fire and Life Safety in Animal Housing Facilities Code*²⁷ is a good starting point. At the very least, annual inspections by fire safety experts should be required.

Rationale: According to data collected by AWI between 2018 and 2021, barn fires are most often caused by heating devices or other electrical malfunction.²⁸ Barn fire protocol should not only address the steps employees are to follow in the event of a fire to ensure the safety of animals, but also include best practices for diminishing the risk. At the very least, annual inspections by fire safety experts should be required—because preemptively identifying problems, such as malfunctioning or misplaced heat lamps, buildup of dust or debris near light sources, and faulty electrical wires can drastically reduce the occurrence of barn fires. Barn inspections are a simple step farmers can take to prevent fires and are recommended by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, University of Wisconsin-Madison Agriculture Extension, and Iowa’s Center for Agricultural Safety and Health, among others.²⁹

Humane Handling-Broken Tails

Version 4 of the standards requires that 95% of lactating cows observed do not have broken tails at the time of audit.

Recommendation: AWI recommends that Version 5 standards require that producers have less than 1% broken tails among cows observed at audit and that this standard be enforceable through a MCAP.

Rationale: It is generally understood that broken tails are caused either by forceful manipulation of the tail by workers to compel movement or by being stepped on by other cows.³⁰ Broken tails are painful. They are commonly acknowledged as an easily visible indicator of poor welfare and inhumane handling, because the amount of force required to break a tail significantly exceeds the amount of pressure required to move a cow—any breaks caused by handling are unlikely to be accidental.^{31,32}

A worker applying enough force to break a cow’s tail constitutes willful mistreatment. If this were to occur in a federally inspected slaughter plant, a complete shutdown of the plant for an egregious humane handling violation would result. Allowing continued certification of producers

with more than a negligible number of broken tails in their herds is contrary to FARM's purported commitment to stopping willful mistreatment of dairy cows.

We understand that it may be impossible to achieve 0% broken tails because there are occasions when the cause of a broken tail is something other than inhumane handling. However, the 1% margin should account for accidental breaks caused by equipment or other animals. Producers may be concerned about auditors "double counting" cows with broken tails when evaluating the herd. However, because the FARM standards also require that each animal be permanently identified, it should be easy for auditors to determine if any observed broken tails are new or existing.

This low threshold is also in line with what consumers expect. According to AWI's July 2022 survey, 50% "strongly agree" that inhumane handling of cows—such as twisting an animal's tail so hard that it breaks— should result in immediate expulsion of a producer from a dairy industry trade group's animal care certification program. An additional 29% of respondents answered that they "somewhat agree."

Enforcement of All Standards

FARM does not currently enforce a significant number of standards, even through a CIP. AWI recommends that FARM make all its animal welfare standards enforceable. This is a necessary step if consumers are to have confidence that the dairy industry holds itself to the highest standards of animal care, rather than merely aspiring to high standards. Unsurprisingly, in AWI's July 2022 survey, 49% of consumers strongly agreed and 34% somewhat agreed that if a dairy industry trade group provides certifications to producers based on standards related to animal welfare, producers should be required to meet all standards before receiving certification.

AWI thanks FARM for its continued commitment to improving the welfare of dairy cattle. We hope that you will give our recommendations serious consideration. If you require additional information or clarification, please contact us by phone at (202) 446-2153, or by email at adrienne@awionline.org.

Sincerely,



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