Attitudes of Canadian beef producers toward animal welfare

JM Spooner*, CA Schuppli and D Fraser

Animal Welfare Program, Faculty of Land and Food Systems, University of British Columbia, 2357 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4, Canada

* Contact for correspondence and requests for reprints: jeffreyspooner@gmail.com

Abstract

Commercial beef production in western Canada involves raising cows and calves on large tracts of grassland, plus grain-based ‘finishing’ of animals in outdoor feedlots. This study used open-ended, semi-structured interviews to explore views on animal welfare of 23 commercial beef producers in this system. Although wary of the term ‘animal welfare’, participants understood the concept to encompass three well-known elements: (i) basic animal health and body condition; (ii) affective states (comfort, contentment, freedom from hunger or thirst); and (iii) the ability to live a ‘natural’ life. Participants attached importance to protecting animals from natural hardships (extreme weather, predators), yet many regarded some degree of natural challenge as acceptable or even positive. Quiet rumination was uniformly regarded as indicating contentment. Avoiding ‘stress’ was seen as a central goal, to be achieved especially by skilful handling and good facilities. Invasive procedures (branding, castration, de-horning) were recognised as painful but were accepted because they were seen as: (i) necessary for regulatory or management reasons; (ii) satisfactory trade-offs to prevent worse welfare problems such as aggression; or (iii) sufficiently short-term to be relatively unimportant. Other issues — including poor facilities, rough or excessive handling, poor nutrition, and failure to protect health — were regarded as more serious welfare concerns. While feeling constrained by low profits, participants saw good welfare as crucial to profitability. Participants uniformly expressed an ethic of care, enjoyment of working with animals, and varying degrees of willingness to sacrifice personal comfort for animal well-being. We argue that animal welfare policy and advocacy are likely to be more successful in engaging producers if they acknowledge and address producers’ views on animal welfare.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes, beef, Canada, qualitative, values

Introduction

The welfare of food-producing animals has become the focus of intense public debate among philosophers, social critics and animal advocates, but the views of animal producers, who have direct experiential knowledge of food animals, have played remarkably little role in the public debate. Recent research has characterised the views of some European producers, often finding that producers differ substantially from other citizens in what they consider important for animal welfare. Whereas consumers generally stress the ‘naturalness’ of animals’ living conditions (te Velde et al. 2002; Lassen et al. 2006; Vanhonacker et al. 2008; Ellis et al. 2009) animal producers tend to stress basic health (te Velde et al. 2002; Bock & van Huik 2007; Vanhonacker et al. 2008). Of the few inquiries that have focused specifically on beef cattle producers, most have also been based in Europe (eg Wilkie 2005; Boivin et al. 2007; Kjaernes et al. 2008).

In Canada’s western provinces, where beef production involves a distinctive system involving year-round ‘cow-calf’ production on extensive rangeland combined with grain-based ‘finishing’ in outdoor feedlots, it seems likely that producers might also hold distinctive views on animal welfare. Our method was to interview beef producers directly about their conceptual and operational definitions of ‘animal welfare’. We hoped to achieve a realistic and nuanced picture of their attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding good or satisfactory lives for animals. We also hoped to provide policy-makers with a fundamental understanding of beef producer attitudes so as both to inform the public debate and provide constructive input into animal welfare policy. This paper reflects findings from the first of four interview studies undertaken with members of the Canadian beef, pig, dairy and consumer sectors.

Materials and methods

Interviews were conducted with 23 individuals directly involved in the rearing and handling of beef cattle in western Canada. Participants were recruited by a purposive sampling strategy designed to include producers engaged in ranching and feedlot operations in all four western provinces of Canada. Prospective participants were identi-