Developing measures to audit welfare of cattle and pigs at slaughter

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Abstract

Since 1999, animal welfare auditing programmes that utilise five numerically scored core criteria have been used successfully by major restaurant chains to monitor animal welfare in slaughter plants. They had to achieve specific numerical scores in order to remain on the approved supplier list. The five numerically scored criteria (critical control points) are: i) Percentage of animals that fall down during handling; ii) Percentage of animals moved with an electric prod; iii) Percentage of cattle or pigs vocalising in the stunning box or restrainer; iv) Percentage of animals stunned effectively with one application of the stunner; and v) Percentage rendered insensible when hoisted to the bleed rail (has to be 100% to pass the audit). Audit data collected in 2010 by two restaurant companies in 30 beef plants, indicated that 77% of them effectively stunned 100 to 99% of the cattle with a single shot from a captive-bolt gun. All 30 plants passed the audit, which required 95% of more of the cattle stunned with one shot. In eight pork plants with electric stunning, the tongs were placed correctly on 100% of the pigs held in a V-conveyor restrainer. In 95% of the beef plants, and 86% of 25 pork plants, 0% of the animals fell during unloading, movement in the lairage and during handling in the stunning area. In 81% of the beef plants and 77% of the pork plants, 5% or less of the animals were moved with an electric prod. The percentage of cattle vocalising in the stun box and during movement into the stun box was 3% or less in all the plants except one. All scores are per animal, an animal is stunned correctly in the first shot, or not stunned correctly. It either vocalises or it is silent. A passing score is required on all five of the numerically scored core criteria. Due to financial and time constrains, the same auditor assesses both welfare and food safety. Workshops for training auditors last 1.5 days and include two plant visits.

Keywords: animal welfare, audits, cattle, pigs, slaughter, stunning

Introduction

Welfare audits of handling and stunning practices in US beef and pork slaughter plants have been conducted by McDonald’s Corporation and Wendy’s International since 1999. The trend in animal welfare auditing is to use outcome measures (Wray et al 2003; Welfare Quality® 2009). The audit has five numerically scored items that are all critical control points or core criteria. A good critical control point measures multiple problems. For example, poor captive-bolt stunning can be caused by many factors such as poor stunner maintenance, agitated animals or poorly trained people (Grandin 2001a). Vocalisation is associated with electric prod use, excessive pressure from a restraint device, stunning problems or slipping on the floor (Grandin 1998a, 2001b). Falling can be caused by a slippery floor, or excessive electric prod use that causes an animal to become highly agitated.

This auditing system uses the same approach as the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) approach in food safety. The principle is to use a few outcome measures that can detect a variety of problems. Some welfare specialists may object that a welfare audit that formally evaluates just a few points is not complete. In the food industry, there are many practical constraints on both the time that can be devoted to conduct a welfare audit and the amount of time that can be spent training the auditors. To keep auditing costs reasonable, the same auditor can conduct both the food safety audits and the animal welfare audits for the restaurant companies. When the McDonald’s and Wendy’s programmes first started in 1999, the auditors worked for the companies that provided the hamburger patties. Since some customers viewed this as a conflict of interest, the restaurants gradually switched to third-party auditing companies. By 2005, programmes using third-party auditing firms were implemented. Today, every plant that supplies McDonald’s or Wendy’s gets a minimum of a yearly third-party audit. Over a ten-year period, the programme has become increasingly formalised. The objective of this paper is to describe the auditing programme and present data from both the last ten years of auditing and baseline data that were collected before the restaurant audit started.