



RESEARCH BRIEF SUSTAINABILITY

BEEF RESEARCH

Assessing Cow-Calf Welfare. Part 1: Benchmarking Beef Cow Health and Behavior, Handling and Management, Facilities, and Producer Perspectives

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Abstract

Assessment programs are one way beef producers communicate information about animal welfare to retailers and the public. Programs that monitor cattle through the production cycle (e.g., the Global Animal Partnership) or at individual stages (e.g., slaughter; the North American Meat Institute) exist, but to date, there is no assessment program addressing welfare specifically in the cow–calf sector. The objectives of this study were to measure cow–calf health and handling welfare outcomes and gather management, facility, and producer perspective information to 1) describe current practices and 2) inform assessment design. A welfare assessment, designed using features of similar beef and dairy programs, was conducted on 30 California ranches that varied in size (mean 1,051 cows [SD 1,849], range 28 to 10,000 cows) and location within the state. Cattle health and behavior and stockperson handling were measured during a routine procedure (e.g., pregnancy checks) on breeding females ($n = 3,065$). Management and producer perspectives were evaluated through an interview, and facility features were recorded at the chute and water access points. Cattle health problems were rare and seen only on specific ranches (e.g., prevalence of lame cattle: mean 1.3% [SD 1.5], range 0 to 7.1%). Cattle behavior and stockperson handling varied between ranches (e.g., cattle balking: mean 22.0% [SD 21.9], range 1.6 to 78.3%; electric prod use: mean 23.5 [SD 21.5], range 0 to 73.0%). Although some management and facility characteristics were shared by most (e.g., all ranches castrated bull calves; 86% used alleyways with an anti-back gate), other aspects varied (e.g., weaning age: mean 8.2 mo [SD 1.4], range 6 to 11 mo; 43% used shade cover over chute). Most producers shared similar perspectives toward their herd health management plan, but their responses varied when asked to evaluate an animal's pain experience. In terms of assessment design, there were challenges with feasibility (e.g., scheduling a ranch visit on a day cattle were processed was difficult), validity (e.g., cattle may back up calmly to adjust posture or quickly in response to an aggressive handler; without this context, the welfare implications of this behavior are unclear), and comparability (e.g., an explicit animal observation period needed to be defined to make comparisons across ranches). Future assessment programs should consider these qualities when selecting measures to evaluate welfare.

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