2022 High Plains Dairy Conference – Proceedings Summary

Fitness to Transport: New Decision-Making Tool

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Animal welfare is foundational to the success of a dairy operation. The dairy industry has made tremendous progress in the welfare space, but end-of-life decision-making for cull dairy cattle still remains an area of opportunity (Stojkov et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2020; Cockram et al., 2021). Making end-of-life decisions (e.g. culling, timely euthanasia, fitness to transport, etc.) for dairy cattle is complicated and challenging for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to: lack of protocols, ineffective employee training, the bond between caretakers and their cattle, and economic dis/incentives across the supply chain (Walker et al., 2020). Furthermore, the journey that dairy cattle endure when they leave the dairy is not always known or understood (i.e., how many stops will she make, how long will she be in the trailer, how many days until she is slaughtered). This is why ensuring cull cow welfare during this end-of-life phase is critical, and welfare can be optimized when fitness to transport (FTT) decisions are appropriately made for cows and calves shipped from the dairy. The FTT decision responsibilities are shared by all stakeholders within the dairy cattle supply chain (e.g., dairy employees, sale barn employees, cattle buyers); however, the first decision to ship a culled dairy cow/calf is at the dairy and this emphasizes the impact of these decisions on any animal's journey through the supply chain.

Fitness to transport decisions can also have an impact that extends beyond the animal. For instance, FTT decisions not only affects the quality of life for all animals shipped, but also the culture of the farm, those receiving animals at other points in the supply chain, and the dairy industry's reputation. This is why the FARM Program Manual Version 4.0 (FARM, 2021) includes an entire chapter on FTT, a FTT protocol template, and a poster on the do's and don'ts of transporting dairy animals. Despite the fact that guidelines are provided, culled dairy cattle continue to arrive at terminal markets in unfit and compromised conditions (Harris et al., 2017; Vogel et al., 2018; Stojkov et al., 2020 a, b). It is important for the dairy industry to come together to determine how better decisions about FTT can be made.

Moving forward, what can the dairy industry do to make progress and improve FTT decisions throughout the supply chain? As an industry, there needs to be:

- Continued development and support for industry-wide resources that are practical and relevant
- Improved implementation of FTT principles, which should include on-going efforts beyond trainings and audits alone
- Employees making FTT decisions must be empowered and supported
- FTT decisions must be considered as a shared responsibility across the dairy supply chain

In an effort to support stakeholders when faced with these difficult decisions, key members of the dairy industry (e.g., dairies, sale barn representatives, processor representatives, allied industry, and academia) came together to create a training tool (e.g. video) focused on FTT decision-making. The goals of the video are to inform and empower animal caretakers to be proactive and confident in their FTT decisions and to make the FTT evaluation process more straightforward and easy to execute. All information provided in the video aligns with guidance provided in the FARM Program Manual (FARM, 2021).

The video is nearing completion and will soon be available for on-farm use. The vision for this industry resource is for all stakeholders to integrate this video into their training program and infuse the video's principles into the on-farm culture through on-going conversations, employee feedback, educational opportunities, and reward/incentive programs. Although a training video alone will not solve this industry challenge, the creators feel that bringing the supply chain together to make this video with a shared vision for improvement is a key step towards progress.

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