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DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL CODE OF PRACTICE FOR CANADIAN COMMERCIAL MEAT RABBIT PRODUCERS

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ABSTRACT

The welfare of farmed rabbits is a topic of increasing societal interest. Concerns are raised at times that the welfare of farmed rabbits has not kept pace with societal concerns and research findings. In general, producers often feel that farmed animal standards are thrust upon them without an understanding of economic and production realities. In Canada, a collaborative leadership approach has been taken through the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) to give voice to societal, researcher, veterinary, and producer perspectives. NFACC's approach is unique internationally and provides a forum for open dialogue amongst groups that have a range of ideas on animal welfare. The aim is to develop processes that address farm animal welfare in a manner that is based on science, practical for producers and respectful of societal values.

Progress on farmed animal care and welfare requires buy-in from many stakeholders, including producers. Canada's Code of Practice development process is an example of how improvements in farmed animal welfare can be achieved by ensuring all stakeholders are full participants in the process. The credibility of the Codes is based on scientific rigour, collaboration of all key stakeholders, and consistency of approach.

Canada's Codes of Practice are national guidelines for the care and handling of the different species of farm animals. They promote sound management and welfare practices through recommendations and requirements for housing, management, transportation, and other animal husbandry practices.

The Codes are prepared with the input and support of scientific experts and by consensus of diverse groups involved or interested in farm animal care and welfare. Canada is of the opinion that the collaborative participation of all key stakeholders is critical for broad acceptance and implementation of the Codes. In 2015, NFACC initiated the process of developing Canada's first Code of Practice for Care and Handling of Rabbits by coordinating and bringing together a Rabbit Code Development Committee and a Rabbit Scientific Committee, which addresses industry priority welfare issues. The Code is expected to be completed in 2017.

Key words: Farmed rabbit welfare, Producer engagement, Codes of Practice

INTRODUCTION

The welfare of farmed animals, including rabbits, is of increasing interest to society. Concerns are raised at times that the welfare of farmed animals has not kept pace with societal concerns and research findings. Conversely, producers often feel that farmed animal standards are thrust upon them without an understanding of economic and production realities. In Canada, a collaborative leadership approach has been taken through the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) to give voice to societal, researcher, veterinary, and producer perspectives. NFACC provides a forum for open dialogue amongst groups that have a range of ideas on animal welfare. The aim is to develop processes that address farm animal welfare in a manner that is informed by science, practical for farmers, and respectful of societal values. NFACC is in the process of developing a new Code of Practice for Rabbits and this will be described further.

CANADA'S CODES OF PRACTICE

Canada's Codes of Practice are national guidelines for the care and handling of the different species of farm animals, and a Code of Practice has been written for most farmed animal species in Canada, although some gaps have existed, as for farmed rabbits. The Codes promote sound management and welfare practices through recommendations and requirements for housing, management, transportation, and other animal husbandry practices. The Codes of Practice serve as extension tools, reference materials for regulations, and as a foundation for national and industry-led animal care assessment programs.

Codes of Practice were initially developed in Canada beginning in the 1980's. NFACC was created in 2005 with the mandates of establishing a renewed Code development process and updating the existing Codes. The process developed by NFACC is inclusive and involves all stakeholders, and uses a consensus model for decision-making. NFACC determines the process that Code development must follow, but not the actual content of the Code. As well, development of a Code of Practice is not mandatory and the development process does not begin until the national commodity or specialized industry group identifies the need for a Code of Practice or its revision.

The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Dairy Cattle (2009) was the first Code to be updated according to NFACC's Code process, and revisions of the Codes of Practice for beef cattle, mink, farmed fox, pigs, equids, sheep, and poultry (meat birds and layers) have followed. In 2015, following indications of national interest and requests from rabbit industry groups, NFACC initiated a process for developing a Code of Practice for Rabbits.

The Code of Practice for each species is written by the Code Development Committee. Members of the committee represent producers, transporters, veterinarians, animal welfare organizations and enforcement agencies, retail and food service, processors, government agricultural agencies, researchers, and technical experts. The committee size and membership may vary depending on the exact nature of the Code under development; for example, the Rabbit Code Development Committee does not include representation from transporters or the retail and food service sector. The Rabbit Code Development Committee is small, compared to other Code Committees, and consists of 12 members. An NFACC Code Secretary provides oversight to ensure that the process is consistently followed and the Secretary serves as a neutral facilitator during Code Committee discussions. The committee is also supported by provincial producer groups, e.g., Ontario Rabbit and a provincial processor, who both act in an observer capacity.

In support of the Code Development Committee, a Scientific Committee is tasked with providing scientific background for "priority welfare issues". The rabbit research group is supported by a scientific writer and consists of three scientists nominated by the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, the Canadian Society of Animal Science, and the Canadian Chapter of the International Society for Applied Ethology. Priority welfare issues are those key welfare issues for which a critical review of the scientific literature is deemed necessary to inform Code requirements and recommendations. See Table 1 for the list of priority welfare issues identified for the Rabbit Code of Practice. The Scientific Committee develops a written report synthesizing the results of research relating to priority welfare issues; the report is later peer-reviewed, and published on the NFACC website and this is expected to occur in fall 2016 for the new Rabbit Code. The Scientific Committee report does not make recommendations concerning Code content; however, the Scientific Committee Chair is also a member of the Code Development Committee, and, in this capacity, can advise not only as to the objective conclusions of the research but also how the research should be used to inform the Code content.

The entire Code development process will take approximately two years to complete for the farmed rabbit sector. Face-to-face meetings of the Code Development Committee take place every two to six months and sections of the Code are reviewed and revised during those meetings.

Table 1: Priority welfare issues reviewed in the Scientific Committee Report for the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Rabbits

Subject area	Specific issues to be addressed
Housing and facilities	Pen and cage design Stocking density Opportunities for social housing Environmental refinements
Feed and water management	Quality and quantity Feed restriction Use of fibre
Health management	Recognition of pain and distress Disease management
Reproduction	Artificial insemination Breeding doe management Weaning and kit management
Pre-transport considerations	Feed and water withdrawal Loading density Containers
On-farm euthanasia	Euthanasia plans Recognizing when to euthanize Acceptable methods

While the Code content is kept confidential during the development period, members of the Code Development Committee are encouraged to consult with their constituents and feedback from representative groups is considered at each stage of the Code development process. Following completion of a draft Code of Practice, NFACC makes the draft Code available for a 60-day public comment period; this is expected to occur in the late fall of 2016 for the Rabbit Code. Feedback is elicited using an online submission template and participating individuals and organizations are asked to identify the perspective from which they are providing feedback. All anonymized comments are reviewed by the entire Code Development Committee and revisions to the draft Code are made in a final face-to-face meeting.

FORMAT FOR CODES OF PRACTICE

Codes of Practice are produced according to an established format and copyrights are jointly held by the commodity association/industry group involved and NFACC. The Rabbit Code of Practice will begin with a general statement regarding animal welfare and the scope of the Code. The body of the Code will consist of chapters addressing facilities and housing, feed and water, health management, husbandry practices, reproductive management, transportation, and euthanasia. The Code concludes with references, a glossary, and a number of appendices covering special topics, such as body condition scoring and euthanasia methods. Resources are included for further information.

Importantly, Canada's Codes of Practice now make a clear distinction between requirements and recommended practices. Each section of the Code begins with an introduction that provides background information and the rationale for the requirements and recommended practices that follow. Requirements are worded as "must" statements and refer either to a regulatory requirement or industry-imposed expectation outlining acceptable and unacceptable practices. Recommended practices support the Code's Requirements, promote producer education, and encourage adoption of practices for continuous improvement in animal welfare outcomes. Recommended Practices are generally expected to enhance animal welfare outcomes, but failure to implement them does not imply that acceptable standards of animal care are not met.

CHALLENGES FOR THE CANADIAN RABBIT CODE OF PRACTICE

A significant challenge for the Rabbit Code is the fragmentation and diversity of the industry across Canada and the lack of a national producer or marketing group. Establishing welfare and management standards that apply to everything from rabbits bred in modest numbers and raised for show to more intensely raised commercial meat rabbits presents a difficult task. Codes of Practice represent a consensus amongst diverse stakeholder groups. Consensus results in a decision that everyone agrees advances animal welfare but does not imply unequivocal endorsement of every aspect of the Code by all parties.

Lack of research in some areas, or ambiguity of research results, also presents challenges for the Code Development Committee. Reconciling scientific evidence with industry traditions is not always easy. When possible, recommendations are based on the strength of scientific evidence, but when this does not exist practices are based on current accepted methods.

CONCLUSIONS

Progress on farmed rabbit care and welfare requires buy-in from many stakeholders. Canada's Code of Practice development process is an example of how improvements in farmed rabbit welfare can be achieved by ensuring all stakeholders are full participants in the process. Extending awareness of the Code process enhances the trust and comfort in the resulting Codes of Practice and is a prerequisite to achieving buy-in for the Code from the many stakeholders that share an interest in how farmed rabbits are handled and cared for.

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