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Attitudes of Canadian beef producers toward animal welfare

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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