

Expert Panel Addresses Hidden Camera Investigation at Manitoba Swine Farm

A panel of farm animal care specialists has examined undercover video from a Manitoba hog farm and concludes while some of the animal handling practices shown are improper, most of what is seen are widely considered acceptable and humane. The Center for Food Integrity (CFI) created the Animal Care Review Panel to engage recognized animal care specialists to examine hidden camera video investigations and provide expert perspectives for food retailers, the pork industry and the media.

The panel that examined the recent video in Manitoba was comprised of Dr. Laurie Connor, University of Manitoba; Dr. Jennifer Brown, Prairie Swine Centre; and Dr. Robert Friendship, Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph.

The experts viewed a 3-minute video segment produced by the group Mercy For Animals. The news magazine television series W5 also used clips of the video in a report.

“The issues the video raises are the main ones the pork industry is already examining – gestation housing, euthanasia, and pain control with regard to procedures like castration,” said Friendship. “These are complicated issues and sensationalizing them doesn’t help us arrive at a solution.”

Video Examination

The video shows a sow biting at the bars of its stall and claims the animals are driven mad by stress and boredom.

“That’s the way the animals react at feeding time,” said Connor. “Or maybe somebody had just come into the room and these animals associate this with feeding time. Between feeding times they are usually quiet and docile.”

Close-up shots of animals with shoulder sores and facial scrapes and cuts are shown with the implication they are due to the animals being housed in individual stalls.

“In any animal population you have to expect a certain level of injury and things that might look unpleasant but the real concern is how quickly they’re treated for these things,” said Brown. “The video didn’t show us that.”

“It’s the same as going into a schoolyard and finding a kid with a scraped knee,” added Friendship. “These things happen and they happen in every type of housing system. You’ll find lesions on animals living outdoors.”

The video shows farm employees euthanizing piglets by striking their heads against a concrete floor. It’s known as blunt force trauma and is viewed as humane if carried out properly, according to the panelists.

“It’s not a pleasant sight and the people who carry it out don’t find it pleasant either,” said Connor. “But it is the humane thing to do.”

“The practices they were using were fine,” said Brown. “We should be more concerned when euthanasia does not occur in a timely fashion and piglets suffer needlessly.”

The panelists acknowledged it can be disturbing to watch farm employees casually euthanizing animals or even making flippant comments during castration or tail docking.

“It’s shocking to see initially, but you have to understand these people do these things on a daily basis,” said Friendship. “They become desensitized to it and this is disturbing to the general public.”

A captive bolt gun is used to euthanize an animal in the video. The process involves shooting a bolt into the animal’s head – a process veterinary organizations view as humane. A worker who has carried out the process is seen touching the animals’ twitching eye.

“That’s standard procedure to make sure the animal has been successfully euthanized,” said Connor.

“We train people to not just walk away – make certain the animal is dead,” said Friendship. “They should test for corneal reflex or any other indication that the animal is not dead. It looked to me like these employees knew what they were doing and carried it out properly.”

Another scene shows an employee using a metal rod to probe the animal’s skull, a procedure known as pithing. The experts said this is recommended to ensure that the pig is dead.

In another scene, the narrator claims a piglet is squealing in pain during castration.

“It appears to me the pig is squealing just as much because it is being held upside down or because it is being restrained,” said Connor. “The industry is looking into things such as using analgesics to make this a less painful process but it appeared to me the farm worker was carrying out the process well and quickly.”

“The video seems to claim castration is a process limited to what they call ‘factory farms’, but virtually all male pigs are castrated,” said Friendship. “Farms 50 years ago performed this when the pigs were much bigger which made it much more painful. These small piglets recover very quickly.”

“Things are better today but this procedure does cause pain for a short period of time, and practical methods of addressing this issue are being examined.”

Another scene shows a sow with a prolapse walking down an aisle.

“There’s nothing that can be done to fix that so I assume they were walking her down the aisle to euthanize her,” said Brown. “The sow was walking with very easy movement. I didn’t see any mistreatment. It did not appear the animal had been suffering long because the lesion appeared to be fresh.”

In another scene a worker is shown dredging what the video implies to be unclean water in a drinking trough.

“That’s actually feed in the water and pigs like that,” said Friendship. “That isn’t hurting the animal at all.”

“They may have been in the process of running a scraper down the trough to clean it out,” added Connor.

Room for Improvement

One piglet in the video is euthanized by swinging it into a metal post which is not acceptable, according to the experts, as it is more difficult to ensure the animal does not suffer.

In another scene, an animal that is apparently having trouble getting up is kicked and slapped. One worker tries to raise the animal by pulling its ears.

“That is unacceptable,” said Friendship. “I’ve been on farms where people seen doing that kind of thing would be fired on the spot.”

Another scene portrays a sow trapped between the rails of a stall.

“This may have been an isolated incident,” said Connor. “If it’s happening on a regular basis then farm management should do something to make the stalls safer. But we can’t draw a conclusion from this video.”

Hidden camera investigations at livestock farms have heightened public attention on animal care issues. In an effort to foster a more balanced conversation and to provide credible feedback to promote continuous improvement in farm animal care, CFI created the Animal Care Review Panel.

The Panel operates independently. Its reviews, assessments, recommendations and reports will not be submitted to the pork industry for review or approval. CFI’s only role is to facilitate the review process and release the panel’s findings.

About the Experts

Dr. Laurie Connor

Professor and Head, Department of Animal Science, University of Manitoba

Dr. Connor has over 20 years of experience teaching and conducting research in areas of livestock reproduction, animal environment interactions, welfare and management relative to pig housing. She also chaired the national committee responsible for the Recommended Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Farm Animals: Pigs (1993). Recent and current research includes: evaluating sow welfare and productivity in a large commercial group housing system; assessing sow longevity and sow lameness in different housing systems and a collaborative project focused on providing decision-making tools for pork producers to successfully convert to sow group housing.

Dr. Bob Friendship

Professor, Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph

Dr. Friendship's principal areas of interest are swine health management, disease surveillance and pre-harvest aspects of food safety. His time is equally divided between teaching and research. Both of these activities bring him into contact with farmers and veterinary practitioners on a regular basis. He has conducted research into sow reproduction and longevity, antimicrobial resistance, interaction of diseases and environmental factors, and syndromic surveillance using veterinary clinics and other data sources. Dr. Friendship has taught swine health management components of clinical medicine in the undergraduate veterinary curriculum and a graduate course in swine health management.

Dr. Jennifer Brown

Research Scientist – Ethology, Prairie Swine Centre

Dr. Brown completed her PhD in Applied Ethology at the University of Guelph, where she studied the effects of temperament and handling experience on the stress response of market pigs and pork quality. Before entering the field of ethology, Jennifer obtained BSc and MSc degrees at the University of Prince Edward Island, and worked in clinical chemistry research. Her research interests include behaviour, stress physiology, and individual differences (temperament) in pigs, with a focus on humane handling and slaughter methods and the interaction of genetic and environmental factors. Current research projects examine transport and handling methods and the relationship between temperament and the stress response.