

Welfare of deer at deer slaughter premises

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Abstract

Animal welfare is a key issue in western society, and the high profile and importance of agriculture in New Zealand means that the welfare of farm animals is under the scrutiny of the New Zealand public and our export markets. The role of MAF Verification Agency veterinarians working at export slaughterhouses is discussed. Stock presented for slaughter should be fit for human consumption, and should not have suffered pain or distress during transport, as the result of any illness or injury. The Animal Welfare Act 1999 places obligations on those who are responsible for the care of animals, whether on farms, during transport or handling.

Operators of slaughter premises must follow approved procedures when receiving stock and abnormal, diseased, injured and/or distressed stock are identified and dealt with promptly. MAF VA ensures that such stock is humanely disposed of, and follows up animal welfare breaches. In dealing with welfare cases, MAF vets liaise with stock transporters, processing companies, suppliers, and veterinary practitioners. Serious cases are referred to the MAF investigation/enforcement group. Evidence from clinical examination, post mortem, and pathology is collected to support potential prosecutions under the Animal Welfare Act.

Typical welfare investigations are discussed, eg neglect, breaches of transport requirements and velveting codes. It is an offence to transport diseased, injured, or otherwise unfit stock for slaughter, without veterinary examination and certification. Practitioners need to be aware of the relevant standards. This paper discusses the Animal Welfare Act, NAWAC Codes, and requirements for AgM82 certification. The official health assurances that accompany export meat overseas certify that the meat has been produced to high food safety and animal welfare standards. Veterinary practitioners and farmer clients can help to maintain New Zealand's status as a meat exporter by understanding the relevant codes and submitting healthy, fit stock for slaughter.

Introduction

Animal welfare is a key issue in western society, and the high profile and importance of agriculture in New Zealand ensures that the welfare of farm animals is under the scrutiny of the New Zealand public and our export markets. Live sheep shipments, tail docking of dairy cattle, de-velveting of deer and pest control methods have all attracted international attention (MAF Press Release 14/02/2000).

This MAF Verification Agency presentation outlines the role of MAF vets at licensed export slaughter premises in monitoring and dealing with welfare issues that arise. The legislative context is discussed, including Animal Welfare Act 1999, MAF Food Assurance Authority specifications, and export market requirements. The legal powers and obligations, in relation to animal welfare, of both MAF and non-MAF veterinarians are described.

MAFVA vets observe the condition of livestock that have been transported to slaughter premises. Veterinary practitioners may have had recent contact with the animals, and transport requirements are discussed so that practitioners are aware of, can act and give advice on what is acceptable for transport to slaughter. Animals that have been injured, or are diseased, must be examined by a veterinarian prior for assessment as to suitability for transport and slaughter for human consumption. A main focus of this presentation is requirements for AgM82 certification, and assisting practitioners to ensure that the animals reach the slaughterhouse in a state similar to when loaded.

Main welfare concerns at Deer Slaughter Premises are outlined, with reference to real cases. These include neglect on the farm, transport and velveting breaches.

Options for disposal of injured farm animals are presented. This may include petfood processing or disposal on the farm of origin.

Sources of information for practitioners are given.

1. MAF Verification Agency Animal Welfare Role

The animal welfare role of MAF VA has two key components. Surveillance, investigation and education of industry and supplier participants gives the New Zealand public confidence that the welfare of food producing animals is maintained until, and including, the time of slaughter. As slaughter is an emotive issue within society, this work gives credibility to the accepted practice of producing food from animals.

The second important aspect is the official assurance given by the New Zealand government to overseas export markets. The assurance confirms to our increasingly vigilant overseas consumers, that the food has been produced to agreed welfare, and food safety, standards.

Because these components are driven by changes in society's perception of what is acceptable, our work is also continually adapting to these demands. An example in New Zealand is the development of Codes of Minimum Standards and Recommendations, which are a reflection of what practices are generally acceptable to a majority of consumers and participants. The Codes can be reviewed over time, as the goalposts change or evolve further.

MAF VA vets have a frontline presence at 57 Meat Export premises within New Zealand. There are approximately 190 vets who are trained and warranted animal welfare inspectors. As stock are presented to slaughter premises, MAF vets frequently monitor the condition of the animals when they arrive, the unloading procedures, and all subsequent handling procedures. This also includes verification of the company's humane slaughter quality assurance programme. Operators of the slaughter premises must follow approved procedures when receiving stock, and must identify abnormal, diseased, injured and/or distressed stock. These animals are dealt with promptly, under the supervision of, or directly by, the MAF vet.

Investigation of animal welfare breaches is undertaken according to criteria relating to the degree of suffering or distress witnessed. Minor, or first-time breaches, where significant suffering is not a factor, are dealt with by educational measures. More serious cases are referred to the MAF Biosecurity Special Investigation Group for follow-up. This may involve contact with transport operators, livestock agents, farmers, and veterinary practitioners.

Outcomes which must be met include ante-mortem inspection on all stock presented for slaughter for human consumption within 24 hours of arrival at slaughter premises, and no stock to be removed from slaughter premises without permission of MAFVA. Animal welfare cases are not allowed to be removed, as this would subject the animals to further suffering. Only healthy stock are slaughtered. Animals that are diseased, abnormal or suffering are identified and dealt with at the inspection. This includes appropriate disposition to avoid inclusion in the food chain.

At the conclusion of MAF investigations, official warnings or prosecutions may be brought against persons who have breached the Animal Welfare Act. The penalties can be significant. The paramount objective of any investigation is to prevent or alleviate suffering and distress of livestock.

The official export assurances given by MAF VA are therefore underpinned by personal knowledge and verification of operations at slaughter premises.

2. Animal Welfare within MAF

The MAF Animal Welfare Group is involved in promoting policies for the humane treatment of animals. It supports the development of animal welfare standards within NZ agriculture, which will contribute to market success and optimum product positioning for New Zealand's animal products and animals. A consultative approach is used in policy and standards development, and the group has many links with others involved in working with animals. This includes research, education, training, enforcement, livestock farmers, the New Zealand

public, and overseas markets and consumers. MAF VA frontline vets also communicate with this group and contribute to the development of standards relevant to transport and slaughter premises.

3. Legislation protecting welfare of food producing animals in NZ

NZ law, National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC) Codes, and MAF Food specifications include a variety of controls relating to welfare of livestock used for the production of food.

The Animal Welfare Act 1999 represents a significant shift in values, replacing the Animals Protection Act of 1960. The focus is away from ownership. Now all persons with responsibility of care of animals must ensure the animals' physical, health and behavioural needs are met, and that pain and distress of ill or injured animals is alleviated. This includes persons with a transient relationship with an animal – eg. at sale yards, during transport, and at processing premises. The Act seeks to balance society's expectations with the practicalities surrounding the use of animals for food (and other uses).

"The needs of animals are defined internationally as the "five freedoms". These are: proper and sufficient food and water, adequate shelter, the opportunity to display normal patterns of behaviour, physical handling in a manner that minimises the likelihood of unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress, and protection from, and rapid diagnosis of, any significant injury and disease" (MAF Press Release, 14/02/2000).

The Act uses codes of welfare to provide detailed minimum standards of care towards animals. 21 Codes have been developed, encompassing accepted welfare standards for production animal husbandry and procedures.

Some codes which are relevant to deer practitioners are:

- Dairy Cattle
- Sheep
- Animals Transported within New Zealand
- Animals at Time of Slaughter at Licensed and Approved Premises
- Animals at Saleyards
- Emergency Slaughter of Farm Livestock
- Deer During the Removal of Antler
- Red and Wapiti Yearling Stags During the Use of Rubber Rings to Induce Analgesia for the Removal of Spiker Velvet
- Yearling Fallow Deer During the use of Rubber Rings to Prevent Antler/Pedicle Growth

The deer industry is currently drafting a **Deer Code**. An NZVA working party has recently drafted Guidelines for the Transport of Livestock for Slaughter, to assist veterinarians in their assessments of suitability of stock for transport and slaughter for human consumption.

3.1 Powers conferred by the Animal Welfare Act 1999

Auxiliary officers are appointed persons working in animal shelters and who have powers to destroy or re-home animals.

MAF veterinarians are trained and warranted as Animal Welfare Inspectors.

Approved organisations can have **warranted inspectors, who are not veterinarians**, who have completed the National Certificate in Compliance and Regulatory Control (Animal Welfare). Eg RSPCA

Police officers are also inspectors.

MAF VA Veterinarians have the following powers:

- Power of entry without search warrant to inspect animals
- Power to seize ill-treated or suffering animals
- Power to search and seize evidence of breach of the Act
- Power to take steps, and direct the owner or person in charge, to prevent or mitigate suffering of any animals.

Registered veterinarians have other powers, including being able to destroy severely sick or injured animals, and to certify destruction of impounded animals that are in a continual state of suffering. There is also a duty to report severely injured or sick marine mammals found, but these may only be destroyed under the direction of a Ministry of Fisheries or Department of Conservation Officer.

4. Transport of livestock to slaughter

The Meat Regulations 1969 state that animals unfit for human consumption may not be sent to a slaughterhouse. The Animal Welfare Act 1999 stipulates that stock must be fit for transport.

It is an offence to send for slaughter, stock that are diseased, injured, or otherwise unfit for transport, unless the stock have been examined by a veterinary practitioner and certified as fit.

Practitioners need to be aware of the relevant standards pertaining to their practice and clients. Some terms such as "fit for transport" and "weight-bearing" have been subject to interpretation and debate. The Codes, and the NZVA Guidelines, contain detailed standards.

For example the definition of "weight-bearing" is clarified as follows "Animals selected for transport must be able to stand, bear weight and walk on all four entire limbs and be fit enough to withstand the journey without suffering unreasonable pain or distress. An exception is an animal with an amputated claw, which will be eligible for transport providing it can bear weight and walk on the remaining intact claw without suffering unreasonable pain or distress." (NZVA Guidelines for the Transport of Livestock for Slaughter, draft April 2002)

Some conditions, such as broken legs, amputations, and missing hooves, mean that the animal is not permitted to be transported to a slaughterhouse.

The animal should be able to arrive at the destination in a state similar to that when loaded.

"A veterinarian must examine all suspect sick, injured or deformed animals if it is intended to transport them for slaughter and only those being certified as fit to be transported and slaughtered be allowed to be transported". In these cases "The animal must be able to walk up and down a loading ramp both before and after transport." (NZVA Guidelines draft April 2002).

The certifying practitioner must also make an assessment of the animal's suitability for food for human consumption. Many disease states preclude this use; eg any infection with bacteraemia, septicaemia, enterotoxaemia, metastatic neoplasias, purulent or pyogenic lesions.

When certifying animals as fit for these purposes, the veterinarian must also consider the following:

- Expiry Dates on certificates - to prevent worsening of the condition. Time delays may render the animals unfit for transport and/or slaughter for human consumption. Examples of this are cancer eye and mastitis in cattle. Under the Animal Welfare Act, these animals must be either dispatched to slaughter or treated - but not left on the farm to suffer.
- Meat Withholding Periods for any animal treatments given by the owner or the vet.

- Ensure the supplier advises the transport operator of any unfit animals requiring transport, prior to collection.
- Supplier to advise the slaughter premises and MAFVA prior to transport, to ensure that the animal is attended to immediately it arrives at the plant.

Practitioners unsure on the suitability or otherwise of animals as to whether they are fit to be transported and slaughtered are strongly advised to contact their MAF VA colleagues for guidance.

A summary of AgM82 requirements is:

- Adequate description of condition of animal and injury at time of examination
- Avoid certifying animal for transport over the phone.
- Fitness for transport – according to Transport guidelines
- Type of transport – special transport conditions
- Fitness for slaughter for human consumption
- Animal treatment meat withholding periods complied with
- Expiry date for certificate adequate to insure against progression of disease/injury
- Nearest slaughter premises
- Contact MAFVA at slaughter premises
- Supplier aware of importance of complying with conditions, of advising transporter and slaughter premises prior to transport of the affected animal/s.

5. Common deer welfare cases presented at slaughter premises

Cases that MAFVA investigate relate to neglect, transporting and velvetting breaches.

5.1 On-farm neglect

- Injuries/poor handling - eg wire, fighting wounds
- Disease - undiagnosed, untreated
- Feeding (emaciation)

5.2 Transport management

This includes handling on the farm, yarding and selection for transport, transport to slaughter premises, and unloading procedures. Particularly with deer, poor management of these procedures can cause problems with fighting, trampling, and injury. Factors include:

- Mixing of mobs or ages, where they had not been mixed on the farm.
- Transporting injured, lame deer, causing further distress, suffering. These animals are likely to go down in the pen and become trampled to death.
- Handling of antlered stags. Even when these animals have been grazed together on the farm, the changes in behaviour that occur with handling and yarding often results in fighting. The outcome can be carcasses with extensive bruising, and suffering to the live animal.

5.3 Velvet removal breaches

- Left too long - potential for damage, pain, distress, haemorrhage during transport.
- Cut too short – ie polling. Resultant infection, suffering, complications eg flystrike, abscessation.
- Tourniquets left on, causing necrosis of pedicle and risk of infection.
- Incorrect "elastator" type rings used for compression analgesia, or applied after removal of velvet to prevent haemorrhage.
- Hardened re-growth left on, causing damage during yarding and transport with resultant bruising and suffering.

Contravention of velvet antler removal codes may result in investigation and legal action by the MAF Special Investigation Group.

6. Options for Disposal of Injured Stock on Farm

Injured animals, if *fit for human consumption*, may be killed on the farm for the owners consumption. If *fit for transport to the nearest slaughtering premises*, they require an **AgM82**, and the MAF VA vet should be notified in advance.

If *not fit for transport*, but suitable for *petfood*, animals may be slaughtered on the farm and taken to a petfood premises. The animals must have been humanely destroyed immediately prior to collection, by a vet or approved operator using an approved method. Transport of these pet food carcasses must ensure delivery within 6 hours of slaughter, to a licensed petfood premises (this applies only to stock and farmed deer that have had traumatic injury). MAF Food is currently reviewing the standards for petfood collection.

7. References and sources of information for practitioners

MAF Publications:

Animal Welfare in New Zealand
Guide to the Animal Welfare Act 1999

NAWAC Codes - available from Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
P O Box 2526, Wellington (also available electronically, see below)

The Animal Welfare Act - What every animal owner should know. MAF Press Release 14 Feb 2000.

MAF Animal Welfare Website: www.maf.govt.nz/biosecurity/animal-welfare/index-htm

Homepage includes:

Draft Codes of Welfare
Codes of Recommendations and Minimum Standards
About the Animal Welfare Group
Animal Welfare in NZ
NAWAC
NAEAC
Animal Welfare Act 1999
Animal Welfare Links

Gonyou, H W et al (2000) Behavioural principles of animal handling and transport. Livestock Handling and Transport. CABI Publishing, UK.

Seigel PB et al (2000) General principles of stress and well being. Livestock Handling and Transport. CABI Publishing, UK

Broom, DM et al (2000) Welfare Assessment and Welfare Problem Areas during Handling and Transport. Livestock Handling and Transport. CABI Publishing, UK