



Expert Panel Addresses New Hidden Camera Investigation

A panel of farm animal care specialists established to analyze undercover video investigations at livestock farms has completed a review of an investigation posted in the internet on July 16, 2012 by the group Mercy For Animals. 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, The Center for Food Integrity (CFI) created the Animal Care Review Panel.

The Panel that examined the recent video was comprised of Dr. Janeen Salak-Johnson, University of Illinois; Dr. Candace Croney, Purdue University; and Dr. John Deen, University of Minnesota.

Panel members generally agree that while some conditions and practices seen in the video could be improved, most of what is shown does not indicate animals were abused or neglected. One panel member summarized the situation:

“Overall, these animals were well taken care of. There were no signs of animal cruelty, abuse or neglect. The sows were clean, free of lesions, calm and in good condition.”

The Panel reviewed a video segment lasting four minutes that was made available to the general public. There was no response from Mercy For Animals to CFI’s request for unedited video so that the Panel could review the farm practices in better context.

A review of the Panel’s observations:

Gestation Stalls

The Panel members note the video inaccurately blames sow gestation stalls for many of the problems animals are experiencing.

“The claim that gestation stalls are cruel, inhumane and abusive is not supported by any of the video footage,” said Salak-Johnson.

“They talk about injuries associated with gestation stalls yet they did not show any injuries that could be associated with gestation stalls,” said Deen.

“The issue of housing sows in stalls obviously raises contention and deserves discussion but much of the video is edited in such a manner as to leave several questions unanswered about the conditions the animals are experiencing,” said Croney.



It was noted that the size of the stalls appeared to be within guidelines – that a sow must be able to lay in full-lateral recumbence. A couple of exceptions were noted.

“There is one sow shown with her head laying on a stainless steel trough,” said Salak-Johnson. “But a different angle showed there was adequate room in the stall. Maybe this sow just chose to lay her head on the trough.”

“It is troublesome that sows are shown laying with legs and udders partially extending into adjacent stalls,” said Cronney. “This could raise issues of comfort and safety.”

Euthanasia

The video showed employees euthanizing piglets by striking their heads against the concrete floor. The Panel members note this use of blunt force trauma, while controversial, is accepted by the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Association of Swine Veterinarians (AASV).

AASV guidelines stipulate “a sharp, firm blow with a heavy blunt instrument on the top of the head ...is an efficient way of humanely killing pigs less than three weeks of age.”

Deen noted that euthanasia is the subject of ongoing discussions in the swine industry and there is disagreement in some circles as to whether a concrete floor can be considered a “heavy blunt instrument.” Salak-Johnson noted one of the pigs shown in the video might have been beyond the commonly accepted weight limit for this method of euthanasia.

“Everyone wants to do what’s best for the animals and blunt force trauma could be the most effective method of euthanasia,” said Deen. “It’s just not attractive to the human eye.”

“The blunt force trauma used to kill compromised piglets looks awful but is very effective when done correctly,” said Cronney. “There are concerns when the procedure is not done correctly because of the potential for pain and suffering and the implications for workers performing the procedure need to be seriously considered.”

Deen and Salak-Johnson both expressed surprise that this farm was using this method of euthanasia. They noted most farms of this size are now using carbon dioxide chambers.

Bar-Biting/Sham Chewing

The video shows scenes of sows biting on the bars of their stalls or demonstrating a behavior called “sham chewing” – the act of appearing to chew on something even though there is nothing in the mouth. The video infers the animals exhibit this behavior because of the stalls in which they are housed.



“Such behavior is common around feeding and the video does not permit one to know when or how long this is occurring,” said Croney. “Attention should be paid to how persistent this behavior is.”

“They didn’t show a lot of animals doing it,” said Salak-Johnson. “If this type of behavior was so prevalent, why didn’t they show more animals doing it?”

Deen and Salak-Johnson noted bar-biting and sham chewing is a behavior also seen in group housing and is not restricted to animals housed in gestation stalls.

Another scene showed an animal butting its snout on the side of the pen with the inference being the behavior is due to the restricted nature of the stall in which the animal was housed.

“It is difficult to attribute this to anything but a negative emotional state,” said Croney. “It’s important to see more here to ascertain the cause and context of the behavior. Regardless, this warrants concern.”

“I’m not sure why the sow was doing that,” said Salak-Johnson. “One thought might be she was hitting the feed lever. But the video didn’t appear to support that the sow was banging her head so violently that it resulted in major injury.”

Castration/Tail Docking

The Panel members agreed the methods shown in the video were standard practice and commonly accepted as proper procedure.

“Although there was no blood, the stockperson did seem to be tearing the tails off instead of cutting them,” said Salak-Johnson. “The same could be said of the castration procedure. It’s possible the practice had become routine and the employee wasn’t as aware as she should have been that it wasn’t being performed in the best interest of the piglet.”

“Standard physical castration and processing (tail docking) is shown – no pain relief is provided,” said Croney.

General Observations

“There appears to be a fly problem. This should be addressed for sow comfort and health.”

“Some piglet sores are common but this looks like there was an oversight of checking the facilities – especially the flooring.”



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“Prolapses can occur and cannot be attributed to being housed in gestation stalls. Regardless, the sow shown with the prolapse should have been promptly treated.”

The Center for Food Integrity created the Animal Care Review Panel to engage recognized animal care specialists to examine video and provide expert perspectives for food retailers, the pork industry and the media. 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 Panel

Dr. Candace Croney Purdue University

Dr. Candace Croney is a renowned expert in applied animal behavior, with an emphasis on animal learning, welfare and ethics. She is an associate professor of animal sciences at Purdue University. She has contributed to nationwide animal welfare efforts working with organizations such as the American Zoo and Aquarium Association and many others. She is on the Scientific Advisory Committee of the American Humane Certified program, and her research on farm animal cognition has been featured in national and international broadcast programs.

Dr. Janeen Salak-Johnson University of Illinois

Dr. Janeen Salak-Johnson is the associate professor in the Department of Animal Sciences at the University of Illinois. She has extensive research in stress and environmental physiology and animal well-being. Specifically, sow housing, prenatal stress, mechanism of stress effects on immune status and behavior of pigs. Dr. Salak-Johnson has presented extensively and published on these contemporary issues and challenges in animal well-being. She received her PhD from Texas Tech University in 1994.

Dr. John Deen University of Minnesota

Dr. John Deen is a professor in veterinary epidemiology at the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Minnesota. His work in research, teaching and extension has been in welfare, epidemiology and economics, focusing on measurement and optimization across competing needs in pig farming. He provides training to farmers, veterinarians, and veterinary students. Dr. Deen is also project lead with USAID in reducing the threats of spread of disease from animals to humans, particularly in central Africa and Southeast Asia. He earned his DVM and PhD from the University of Guelph and gained board certification in swine health management from the American College of Veterinary Practitioners in 1994.

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