



THE CENTER FOR
FOOD INTEGRITY

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Expert Panel Examines Undercover Video from Chicken Processing Facility

KANSAS CITY, MO. (March 15, 2015) – CFI created the Animal Care Review Panel program to engage recognized animal care specialists to examine video and provide expert perspectives for food retailers, the poultry industry and the media. Panels include a veterinarian, an animal scientist and an ethicist to assure various perspectives are represented.

This expert panel that reviewed a recent video from a chicken processing facility and posted online by the group Mercy For Animals was comprised of Dr. Michael Hulet (animal scientist), Pennsylvania State University; Dr. Chuck Hofacre (veterinarian), University of Georgia; and, Dr. Ruth Newberry (ethicist), Washington State University and the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. Their biographies appear below.

Early in the video the narrator states the hidden camera investigation reveals “horrific animal abuse.”

“I don’t see horrific animal abuse in this video,” said Dr. Hofacre. “USDA inspectors are on site. If they see abuse they have authority to stop things.

“If people want to eat meat, we must kill animals. Some of the process isn’t camera-friendly – it’s not pretty. There are systems and processes in place to make sure it’s carried out in a humane manner and I did not see animal abuse in this video.”

Video claim: Birds are bred to grow obese so quickly that many of them become crippled under their own weight.

Dr. Hofacre - “This statement is inaccurate. Birds aren’t raised to be obese and it would be highly unusual for them to become crippled under their own weight. If the birds were obese, that means they’re putting on fat instead of muscle.”

Dr. Hulet - “Birds did not appear obese in the video and legs did not appear splayed or the birds otherwise having problems to stand. After being raised on an organic surface of sawdust or wood chips, the birds are placed on an unfamiliar slick surface as they arrive at the plant and some need time to gain equilibrium.”

Video claim: Sick and diseased, many birds are dead on arrival at the processing facility.

Dr. Newberry - “The narrator says many of the birds arrive dead at the slaughterhouse but no numbers are provided. The percentage of birds arriving dead should be routinely monitored and should not exceed 0.5%. Under best practices, if mortality rises above one bird in 400, the sources of mortality are promptly investigated and remedial steps are taken to correct any problems found.”

Dr. Hulet – “Many times birds are euthanized at the farm and delivered to the plant in a transport coop to put into the rendering tank. DOAs average less than 0.5%. If DOAs are greater than 1.0%, an investigation is usually conducted to determine why and correct the problem.”



Dr. Hofacre – “There were some dead birds shown in the video but there’s no context. There’s no way to tell what happened.”

Dr. Newberry - “Early in the video, two chickens are shown lying on their backs on a pile of feathers. One chicken appears to be dead and the other is breathing. The angle of the filming does not allow the viewer to see where the scene was filmed, or what transpired immediately before and after this brief clip. Any chickens found to be unfit for travel during catching at the chicken house, or discovered to be unfit on arrival at the processing plant, should be promptly euthanized and checked to ensure that they are dead prior to disposal.”

Video claim: On arrival at the plant, the birds are callously dumped from their transport crates.

Dr. Newberry - “A cage-dump system is used to unload chickens from the transport crates. A system that allows chickens to remain calm prior to slaughter would be preferred to minimize stress.”

Dr. Hulet - “The example of positioning the transport crate seen in the video was rougher than desired, but didn’t appear to injure or distress the animals. Certainly, the company would not want the birds injured or the equipment damaged. This method of unloading birds from the transport crates seen in the video actually has lower wing bruises/breaks than other methods.”

Video claim: The birds are quickly and violently slammed into metal shackles.

Dr. Hofacre - “The birds are, indeed, quickly shackled. I disagree they are violently shackled. It’s not appropriate to injure a live animal and there are federal inspection routines in place at all plants to make sure this doesn’t happen.”

Dr. Hulet - “Birds go along a ‘breast rub’ (a bar parallel to the shackles that the birds’ breast rubs against which has been shown to have a calming effect) under low lighting conditions to calm them before they are shackled. No excessive flapping behavior was observed in the video after the employees quickly placed the birds’ legs into the shackles.”

Video claim: Broken legs and torn wings are common.

Dr. Hulet - “There are many reasons for leg problems, but the birds in the video didn’t show severe leg lesions or splaying. Statistics show less than two percent of birds arrive at U.S. processing plants with broken wings.”

Dr. Hofacre - “It’s not common. It would be the result of improper animal handling and would cost a plant a lot of money. It’s impossible to tell from this video the extent of wing and leg problems, but industry statistics show their occurrence to be low.”

Video claim: Employees are urged to shackle sick birds alongside those intended for human consumption.

Dr. Hulet - “Employees on the line are not trained to determine sick or unwholesome birds and that is why they are told to shackle all live birds. There are experts in the plant to determine wholesomeness and can condemn either the whole carcass or parts that are not fit for human consumption.”

Dr. Newberry - “A chicken with an open wound is seen being shackled. In some audit systems, a bird with an open fracture would be considered unfit and would be euthanized rather than being shackled. I realize the employees do not have authority to make those decisions.”



Dr. Hulet – “For a wound such as the one shown, it would be proper to immediately euthanize the bird. Some processing plants have their crew trained in cervical dislocation at the hanging area and the bird would then be immediately euthanized. However, some do not have personnel trained and allow for euthanasia to occur by stunning and exsanguination, which is also a proper euthanasia method. The USDA and company personnel could then judge the wholesomeness of the carcass as the bird is processed.

“The wound evidently occurred after the bird was loaded, and I would prefer something be done immediately to lessen the pain and suffering of the bird when the injury is observed. This could be a point of discussion with the company on modification of euthanasia procedures. As has been mentioned before, this type of injury is definitely not a common occurrence.”

In the video, a plant employee is seen talking about how birds with broken wings or legs can be salvaged as long as they’re still alive.

Dr. Newberry - “I found the employee’s remarks about ‘salvaging’ birds with broken legs or wings to be somewhat callous and not sufficiently focused on animal welfare. This could be a training issue. Some plants use closed-circuit video cameras to monitor handling procedures so that problems can be rapidly detected and rectified.

“Of course, I realize that videos like these are edited to make things look worse than they are.”

Video claim: Desensitized workers often torment birds. One is seen trying to suffocate a bird.

Dr. Newberry - “In this segment of the video, the line is stopped and all the chickens appear calm. While waiting, a worker places hands lightly over the head of a chicken. I see no evidence that the worker is trying to suffocate the bird. On the contrary, providing the chicken with darkness and gentle steady touch can have a calming effect. In an unedited version of this same video clip, you can see that when the worker’s hands are lifted, the chicken looks fine. However, the worker subsequently uses fingers to tickle the comb of the chicken – the bird shakes its head suggesting that it finds that form of handling irritating.”

Dr. Hulet - “What the employee in the video was seen doing is not encouraged but he did not appear to have abuse in mind when handling the bird. When the line is not running, workers try to prevent birds from flying, becoming excited, and possibly getting injured. When the video excerpt in question is allowed to play to its conclusion with no editing, it is obvious the bird was not distressed from the actions of the worker.”

Dr. Hofacre - “It’s unusual for the line to be stopped and an employee to be handling a bird in that manner. You can keep a bird calm by covering its eyes, and maybe that’s what the employee was doing. But, I didn’t see any evidence that the employee was trying to smother the bird.”

Video claim: Birds’ throats are cut even though they can still feel pain.

Dr. Hofacre - “This is an inaccurate statement. The low voltage stunning system makes the birds insensible so they don’t feel pain.”

Dr. Newberry - “In this video segment, stunned birds are shown at the point where an electric knife cuts the major blood vessels of the neck. All birds are hanging with loose necks at this point and they show no signs of consciousness,



contrary to the claim in the video voice-over. A bird is shown in death spasms. Healthy, unconscious birds often show involuntary muscular movement at this time. The massive blood loss ensures that they do not regain consciousness before death.”

Video claim: Some birds make it through the throat-cutting process and are scalded alive. The USDA says one-million birds die this way every year.

Dr. Newberry - “The video shows a person manually cutting the throat of a bird because its throat was not properly cut by the electric knife. The person is stationed to ensure that all birds are dead before entering the scalding tank, where the feathers are loosened prior to plucking.”

Dr. Hulet - “Because all birds do not get stunned, a backup system is employed to make sure birds do not go into the scalding tank alive. The video shows an individual doing just that. Birds that make it to the scalding tank alive are called ‘cadavers’ and according to USDA figures for 2012, 700-thousand birds were listed as cadavers which represents 0.0085% of total production. Most plants concentrate on having no cadavers and try to prevent any birds from being scalded without being exsanguinated.”

Dr. Newberry - “Although live shackling and use of a water bath stunning system is standard practice in the chicken industry, a growing number of animal care experts feel future steps should be taken to develop and implement more advanced stunning systems that do not require the manual hanging of live chickens in an inverted position. For example, new technology currently under development will, if successful, have several advantages over current systems including upright chicken posture prior to stunning, a more immediate stun, no water bath thereby reducing the risk of pre-stun shocks, and precision stunning of each chicken individually.”

Animal Care Review Panel program

Video investigations at livestock and poultry 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 program.

The Panel operates independently. Its reviews, assessments, recommendations and reports are not submitted to the poultry 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. Ruth C. Newberry
Norwegian University of Life Sciences
Washington State University

Dr. Newberry received her B.Sc. in Biology and Ph.D. in Agriculture from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. She conducted research on poultry behavior and welfare for Agriculture and Agri-food Canada before moving to Washington State University in 1996. She is now at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences where her research is focused on environmental enrichment, social behavior, and assessment of affective states. She also teaches courses on applied animal behavior and welfare. Dr. Newberry has served as President of the International Society for Applied Ethology, Secretary of the Canadian Expert Committee on Farm Animal Behaviour and Welfare, Chair of the Poultry Science



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Association's Animal Care Committee, and member of the Scientists Committee for the Canadian Code of Practice on Laying Hens.

Dr. Charles L. Hofacre

Professor, Director of Clinical Services

Department of Avian Medicine College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Georgia

Dr. Hofacre received his MS and DVM from Ohio State University and his Ph. D. from the University of Georgia where he joined the College of Veterinary Medicine in 2003. He previously was Manager of Professional Services at Bayer Animal Health and previously worked for a broiler breeder genetics company and a turkey company.

Dr. R. Michael Hulet

Associate Professor of Animal Science

Pennsylvania State University

Dr. Hulet received an MS in Animal Science from Brigham Young University and Ph. D. in Poultry Science at Texas A&M University. In his present position he is primary instructor and organizer of Poultry Production and Management courses. He has conducted research on topics such as Evaluation of Antibiotic-Free and Organic Husbandry Methods and has conducted educational activities for the National Poultry Waste Management Symposium and Poultry Management and Health Seminars.

Dr. Hulet has authored or co-authored articles in scientific and trade journals. His future plans include research and development of information to enable improved handling, transportation, and biosecurity in the poultry industry.

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