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Expert Panel Addresses Hidden Camera Investigation at Colorado Hog Farm

KANSAS CITY, MO. (Dec. 4, 2014) – The Center for Food Integrity’s (CFI) Animal Care Review Panel has examined undercover video released this week. The video is from a Colorado swine farm according to the group that captured it and posted it online. CFI 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 expert panel was comprised of Dr. Candace Croney, Purdue University; Dr. Lisa Tokach, a practicing swine veterinarian in Kansas; and Dr. Glen Almond, North Carolina State University.

“It is difficult to draw conclusions in many areas of this video given its brevity and that it contains many shots from different times and locations,” said Croney. “There were quite a few clips that were troubling, and it would have been helpful to have had more extensive footage to get a better sense of what occurred, when it occurred, and how the issues were being addressed.”

Animal Care and Handling

Early in the video, there is a close up of a nursing piglet with a face wound.

“It possibly could have been a burn from heat lamps or the piglet could have been injured by the sow,” said Almond. “From the video, it appeared to be healing but, there’s no evidence of treatment. An injectable antibiotic could have been given, but the video would not reveal the treatments, other than topical.”

“I believe this wound was caused by the piglet’s own littermates fighting with it when the needle teeth are not clipped,” said Tokach. “Most producers have gone away from clipping needle teeth due to activists urging them to do so, the high cost of labor to do so, and the fact that in most cases it is not necessary. This, however, is an example of one pig that was harmed by leaving the needle teeth.”

A newborn piglet is seen struggling in a feed trough because it was born in the gestation barn instead of a farrowing stall. Tokach describes it as a management problem.

“Sometimes a sow will give birth prematurely and this type of thing happens,” said Tokach. “But this is a vigorous and, most likely, full-term pig, so my guess is that the management team did not move her to the farrowing barn soon enough. It could have been due to limited space, not enough labor to get the rooms cleaned and disinfected, or overbreeding resulting in too many sows to farrow for the number of stalls. Whatever the reason, this shouldn’t happen.”

In another scene, an aisle is seen crowded with young pigs.

“They appear extremely crowded,” said Tokach. “What most people won’t realize when viewing this video is that they are held this way only briefly as they are herded toward the nursery or toward whatever mode of transportation will take them to the nursery. This is common. It is just shown out of context.”

“This appears to be a typical weaning day on a sow farm,” said Almond. “People may wonder if the farm shouldn’t place fewer pigs in the aisle at one time. Keeping them in tight groups while being moved can ease the process for both people and the animals, but the pigs might have been too crowded in this instance.”

In another part of the video, a sow is seen struggling while lying in a gestation stall.

“This is not acceptable as she is very thin and apparently unable to get up,” said Tokach. “We do not know from the video if she is receiving medical attention or not.”

“It is difficult to identify, but there appears to be a hole in the skull associated with a captive bolt gun discharge, a method of euthanasia accepted by the American Veterinary Medical Association,” said Almond. “The struggling is not unusual with an animal euthanized this way. If the animal is struggling for some other reason, it definitely should have been euthanized immediately.”

Almond noted many of the animals seen in the video appear to be calm and relaxed.

“None of the sows appear to be startled by the individual taking the video,” said Almond. “Evidently, there is no fear factor by the sows toward humans. This reflects positive human/animal interactions.”

Farm employees are seen using what’s known as a “shaker” – a plastic jug filled with BBs – while moving young pigs. The noise created by shaking the jug helps move animals along.

“Shakers are commonly used to get pigs to move and are acceptable,” said Tokach. “It is difficult to tell from the video, but it seems like he/she might actually be hitting the pigs with the shaker, which is not acceptable.”

Procedures

In the video, a farm worker is shown removing piglets’ tails (called tail docking) and performing castration.

“The tail docking and castration seen in the video were performed quickly with minimal handling of the piglet,” said Almond. “Both procedures were conducted expeditiously by a farm worker who appeared to have considerable experience and training.”

“Analgesia or anesthesia were not used, which is not surprising since the industry does not have a licensed product for the control of pain,” added Almond. “The National Pork Board has sponsored research to address this concern.” Tokach takes issue with the video’s narration when the procedures are described as “tails are cut with dull clippers” and “testicles are violently ripped from their bodies.”

“Standard practice is to dock the tails with a sharp tail cutter,” said Tokach. “The video gives no indication to me that the clippers are dull. Piglets are castrated at a young age by making a scrotal incision and removing the testicle. One could just as easily say ‘testicles are removed quickly and efficiently in order to minimize pain.’ I am not suggesting there is no pain involved, I am just against the use of leading, emotional narration.”

“It is accurate to note that these are painful, distressful handling procedures,” said Croney. “Although done as part of normal management practice, which the employee seemed to be performing to standard, it is fair to raise ethical concerns about pain and suffering. Many scientific attempts have been made to alleviate these aversive states associated with castration and tail docking, but short of banning such procedures, mandating pain relief or anesthesia (which results in high piglet death rates at early ages) performing them quickly and at a young age is currently the ‘go to’ means of minimizing distress.”

Facilities and Conditions

The farrowing facilities and gestation stalls all appeared to be in excellent condition, according to Almond.

“I could not detect broken bars, hinges, etc. in any of the stalls – all seemed to be well maintained,” said Almond. “The narrator’s comment that gestation stalls have been banned in Europe is misleading. They are banned after pregnancy is confirmed at 28-35 days and many countries/farms have not adhered to the ban.”

The most damning criticisms, in Croney’s view, relate to housing sows in gestation stalls. Here is her assessment from an ethical perspective:

“The concern about continuous movement restriction is valid given scientific data relative to the ethology of the pig and the benefits of allowing greater freedom of movement. However, this remains a highly contentious ethical issue given the many scientific justifications that exist to support the use of stalls, some of which include individual feeding and monitoring of the animals, management of injurious aggressive encounters, and caretaker safety. That said, in the clips shown, a number of oral stereotypic behaviors were evident, which suggests frustration and coping attempts by the sows; since these oral stereotypic behaviors predominate around feeding times and the clips were so brief, it is difficult to ascertain how many animals were showing these, for how long and at what times. Overall, although the references to sow stalls as inherently abusive or cruel are inflammatory and are likely to be perceived by many involved in swine production as offensive and incorrect, the ethical concerns associated with continuous confinement of sows to stalls, compounded by lack of mental stimulation or enrichment, warrant serious consideration.”

About the Experts

Dr. Candace Croney Purdue University

Dr. Croney is a renowned expert in applied animal behavior, with an emphasis on animal learning, welfare and ethics. She is Associate Professor of Animal Sciences at Purdue University. Dr. Croney 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. Lisa Tokach
Veterinary Clinician
Abilene Animal Hospital

Dr. Tokach specializes in swine population medicine at Abilene Animal Hospital, where she is also the personnel director. In 2001, she was appointed as a diplomat in swine health management to the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners which was renewed in 2011. Dr. Tokach served on the Animal Welfare Committee for the American Veterinary Medical Association and continues to serve on the Pig Welfare Committee for the American Association of Swine Veterinarians. In 2008, Dr. Tokach received the Swine Practitioner of the Year award from the American Association of Swine Practitioners.

Dr. Glen Almond
North Carolina State University

Dr. Almond is a professor of Pig Health and Production at NC State University, where he joined the faculty in 1987 as a graduate research assistant while completing his Ph.D. He received his doctorate in veterinary medicine and master's degree from the Ontario Veterinary College, Guelph, Canada. Prior to receiving his doctorate, he was a food animal practitioner in Alberta, Canada. Dr. Almond's research has focused on reproductive physiology, urogenital disease and interactions between disease and growth. Teaching commitments include veterinary, graduate and undergraduate courses. As coordinator of a senior swine medicine course, he has provided educational opportunities for students from twelve veterinary colleges and six countries.

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