

GOOD MANAGEMENT PRACTICES (GMP) IN BEEF CATTLE PRODUCTION IN URUGUAY. TRAINING AND EXTENSION.

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Introduction

In Uruguay animals are constantly being moved from breeding-and-fattening farms to other establishments, cattle auction markets (for its commercialization) or to slaughter plants^(3,5). Such movements, extended waits in the lairage pens, loading, numerous hours of transport, unloading at the slaughter house, etc; constitute some of the factors responsible for the cattle's nervousness, unwell-being and stress that negatively affect the Animal's Welfare^(4,6,7).

Studies carried out by the Veterinary School (2002/03) showed that almost 70% of the observed carcasses presented some kind of traumatic lesion (bruise) on diverse areas of the carcass and of different deepness. The most relevant lesions were the ones on the loin and round (cuts of higher commercial value) that made up more than 80% of the total bruises. Of these, 20% were of medium and major deepness, therefore the cut, or the whole area had to be condemned. The audit done by INAC, INIA and the Colorado State University in 2003 revealed an economic loss per animal of U\$S 32,52 dollars, concluding that the country loses near U\$S 58 million dollars per year⁽⁵⁾. These results are similar to those find by other countries^(1,2).

It is becoming more and more important each day for all the actors involved in the meat chain to undergo a cultural change regarding cattle management and in relation with the producers of meat for human consumption. It should take place at every stage that surrounds the slaughter (before as well as after), as the animal's welfare does not depend on the last days of life only⁽⁸⁾. Such change of mentality must start at the producers-in-their-farms level promoting the training of its personnel training those involved in transport and capacitating the industry personnel since each animal that arrives has to be correctly treated and sacrificed in order to avoid unnecessary pain⁽⁹⁾.

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At national level the importance of this change in the way of thinking among the sector has been understood as well as the necessity of raising awareness among the whole meat chain. In 2004, the MGAP, through the Agricultural Services Program, approved several projects for the diffusion and training of Good Management Practices in the rural areas.

The objective was to divulge information to the different actors of the meat chain (rural producers, rural employers, intermediaries and truck drivers) about Animal Welfare and Good Management Practices.

Materials and methods

Seminars of diffusion on Good management practices were organized in border and northern areas of the country. All the actors of the meat chain were invited but special emphasis was made on the rural employees and on those involved in the animal's periodic handling. In order to raise the awareness of every actor on the problem of carcass bruises, several visits to the slaughterhouses were programmed.

Diffusion brochures were given out to the participants of the seminars on Good Management Practices in cattle farms, loading and transport, and management in slaughter plants. The information was written in simple and easy to understand language. Through a carefully prepared questionnaire given out to the attendees at the beginning of the seminar, data was obtained about their infrastructure, facilities (condition and characteristics) as well as on the management of the animals in their establishments (persuasive methods, dogs, etc), loading (type of shipping facilities, conditions, hours of loading). Such questionnaire also revealed information on the characteristics and time of the techniques of management applied (wean, castration, dehorning, branding).

The dynamic of the meetings went as follows:

The participants were registered and asked to do the questionnaire, then they were given informative material (brochures). A theoretical presentation followed, supported by audiovisual material, on the necessity of using good management practices in farms. After that, practical demonstrations were carried out in the cattle facilities, putting emphasis on the use of flags or other not cruel, persuasive devices to move the animals. The correct application of vaccines, earrings or identification tags and of the stamp was also highlighted. Finally there was a discussion and exchange of experiences stage and participants are asked to fill an anonymous evaluation form.

Regarding the visits to the slaughterhouses, these were carried out in small groups; the reception facilities were visited along with the lairage pens. The group finally entered the plant in order to observe the carcasses.

Results

The target audience was of nearly 50 participants in each of the more than a dozen seminars done. Producers of the particular area and their employees, intermediaries and truck drivers, technicians, etc. attended the meetings. The profile of the partakers, even if with some variants of little significance, was made up as follows: 50% producers, 30% rural employees, 20% truck drivers and local students.

The anonymous evaluations qualified the seminar as: Very Good 54%, Good 45%; there was no evaluation that considered the meeting as Bad. With regards to the support material handed out, 60% of the participants found it to be Good and 34% Very Good. In terms of the practical application of the discussed topics, 73% of the attendees judged them as Very applicable.

Discussion and conclusion

Once the ethical grounds for Animal Welfare were understood, in addition to the economic losses inadequate cattle handling represents, the participants showed great enthusiasm and excellent disposition as well as a constructive attitude and willingness to change certain traditionally used practices.

The joint effort of several groups of veterinarians, the syndicate associations along with technicians from the Veterinary School and the extension services of Uruguay made possible the achievement of the objectives. Moreover, an important change of mentality can be perceived that will enable the country to enter more exigent markets with very high quality meat and respecting the Animal Welfare.

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