Developing a Robust Humane Handling Program

The American Association of Meat Processors (AAMP) encourages all members that slaughter livestock to consider developing a humane handling program for their establishment. The information contained in this document is to serve as a guide in developing a plan unique to your individual operations. There is no regulatory requirement for a systematic approach to humane handling and slaughter. However, if an establishment develops and maintains a robust systematic approach to humane handling and slaughter, U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) would take that into consideration in the event of an egregious inhumane incident. Having such a plan as this can help an establishment avoid large amounts of paperwork, a negative image to your business, and loss time on the slaughter floor. It is important to note that a second stun is considered egregious (if it is not identified within a humane handling program).

If an establishment requests that Inspection Program Personnel (IPP) consider the establishment’s systematic approach to humane handling and slaughter to be robust, IPP will consider criteria, such as the points that are identified below, when reviewing the written humane handling program and associated records in determining whether it is robust.

Developing a Systematic Approach

For FSIS to consider a systematic approach to be robust, the Agency has the expectation that the systematic approach include a written animal handling program that effectively addresses, through its design, maintenance, and execution, the four aspects of a systematic approach and that also:

- Describes procedures that the establishment will effectively implement to stay in compliance with the humane handling regulations,
- Describes records that the establishment will keep to demonstrate that the program is being implemented as written,
- Describes records that the establishment will keep to demonstrate the program will effectively prevent identified potential noncompliances (NRs),
- Describes actions the establishment will take when it fails to implement the program as written or fails to prevent a noncompliance,
- And is available to inspection program personnel for review.

To develop and maintain a systematic approach to meet the humane handling requirements, FSIS has stated that establishments should:

1. Conduct an initial assessment of where and under what circumstances livestock may experience excitement, discomfort, or accidental injury while being handled in connection with slaughter and, except for establishments conducting ritual slaughter, where and under what circumstances stunning problems may occur.

2. Design facilities and implement practices that will minimize excitement, discomfort, and accidental injury to livestock.
3. Evaluate handling methods periodically to ensure they minimize excitement, discomfort, and accidental injury, and except for establishments conducting ritual slaughter, evaluate stunning methods periodically to ensure that all livestock is rendered insensible to pain by a single blow.

4. Improve handling practices and modify facilities when necessary to minimize excitement, discomfort, and accidental injury to livestock.

Elements of a Robust Plan

Initial Assessment

The establishment should conduct an initial assessment of what needs to be included in a humane handling program that addresses such matters as:

- Areas or equipment specific to the establishment that could cause animals to experience excitement, discomfort, or accidental injury.
- Standard animal handling procedures specific to the establishment to ensure that livestock are handled in a manner to minimize excitement, discomfort, and accidental injury.
- Stunning procedures and equipment that are designed to prevent an ineffective stun or a return to consciousness after stunning.
- Maintain documentation to support that the establishment performed this assessment.

Facility Design & Handling Practices

The establishment should put in place a systematic approach to humane handling that addresses such matters as:

- An animal handling program, facility design, and methods for correcting identified problems.
- Standard operating procedures (SOPs) for live animal handling; for example, the establishment should:
  - Designate a person or a position responsible for providing water and feed so as to meet regulatory requirements;
  - Post stocking levels for live animal holding pens;
  - Develop procedures for identifying and handling disabled or very young animals;
  - Have an animal handling training program for new employees working with live animals;
  - Schedule periodic (e.g., quarterly, annual) refresher training for all employees responsible for handling live animals;
  - Implement procedures for checking that contracted truck drivers delivering animals to the establishment have received humane handling certification;
  - Ensure (e.g., through maintenance records or recording devices) that stunning devices (e.g., captive-bolt, firearm, electrical stunning system, CO2 system) are properly and regularly maintained so that animals are rendered insensible to pain as provided for in the regulations for the various stunning methods;
  - Maintain documentation of its programs that address these matters.
Ongoing Evaluation of Implementation

The establishment should adopt written procedures for verifying that its program is effectively implemented, such as:

- A method for assessing, (e.g., through periodic monitoring) whether those establishment areas where live animals are held or pass through are in good condition and do not present any potential for injury, for example:
  - Evidence that written work orders are created when facility repairs are needed.
  - Maintenance logs to document that regular equipment inspections and maintenance are performed on permanent facility equipment used to move animals (e.g., hydraulic gates, direct current prods).
- A method for ensuring that the animal handling program is effectively implemented, such as an in-house monitoring procedure that:
  - Specifies at what time intervals (e.g., hourly, daily, weekly) the monitoring will be performed, and
  - Identifies designated monitoring points in the process from truck unloading through stunning and bleed-out.

Response to Evaluations

The establishment should have a written program for responding to and making changes in response to identified problems, such as:

- Provisions in the written animal handling program addressing actions to take in the event of a natural disaster (e.g., flood, tornado, or other catastrophic event), fire, or major mechanical breakdown, to minimize injury or distress to animals on-site at or enroute to the establishment.
- A system to track changes made in handling methods that address actual and potential problems identified during monitoring or audit activities.
- A methodology that employees and management would implement in the event that an unanticipated inhumane incident occurs, for example:
  - The methodology may specify that, if an employee observes an inhumane handling incident, that employee is to immediately take action to eliminate or minimize any further animal pain and notify his/her supervisor;
  - The methodology may specify that the supervisor will document the report of the incident, make an assessment based on an investigation, and develop preventative measures to prevent recurrence;
  - The methodology may provide that if an inhumane stunning incident occurs employees are to take immediate action to minimize any further animal pain, stop further slaughter, and notify management;
  - The methodology may provide that management will make an assessment of the incident and will implement immediate corrective actions to prevent recurrence before resuming slaughter, and that the incident as well as all actions taken will be documented; or
  - The methodology may provide that the establishment’s animal handling program will be reviewed and updated as needed, and that there is a provision for periodic (e.g., annual) assessment of the written animal handling program by management personnel.