

Compliance Status with Animal Welfare Requirements at NSW Red Meat Domestic Abattoirs as at 30 June 2013

Background

In response to the animal welfare incident at Hawkesbury Valley Meat Processors PTY LTD in early 2012, the NSW Food Authority (the Authority) conducted a full review of all domestic red meat abattoirs in NSW:

- To assess compliance with Section 7 of AS 4696:2007 Australian Standard for the Hygienic Production and Transportation of Meat and Meat Products for Human Consumption.
- To assess abattoir animal welfare performance against the "Industry Animal Welfare Standards – Livestock Processing Establishments – Preparing Meat For Human Consumption, Second Edition AMIC 2009".
- To make recommendations on how animal welfare practice can be improved in NSW domestic abattoirs.

This review was not limited to assessment of the current legislative requirements at that time. It also included the development of an inspection program that focussed on animal welfare requirements contained in existing voluntary industry standards. As a result it is acknowledged that some of the criteria each abattoir was assessed against was above minimum legislated animal welfare requirements and considered industry best practice. In order to ensure that each abattoir was assessed in a consistent manner, a checklist was developed and used by officers during each abattoir inspection and audit. This checklist focussed on six key animal welfare areas:

1. Management Procedures & Planning
2. Design & Maintenance of Facilities & Equipment
3. Staff Competency
4. Management and Humane Destruction of Weak, Ill or Injured Livestock
5. Management of Livestock to Minimise Stress and Injuries
6. Humane Slaughter Procedures

Review Findings

At the time of the initial review there were ten domestic red meat abattoirs licensed and operating in NSW. All ten were assessed during this review. In total, 79 animal welfare inspections and 29 compliance audits were undertaken on these businesses and reports were submitted and provided to plant management documenting improvements that were required within nominated timeframes.

The initial animal welfare review identified a number of improvements that were required to be implemented within the industry to improve compliance with animal welfare outcomes specified in AS4696:2007. In all ten recommendations were made to the Authority as an outcome of the review which proposed a range of measures to improve animal welfare systems, compliance and regulatory oversight.

These recommendations were subsequently fully adopted by the Authority and implemented through the licensed abattoirs. In order to assess industry compliance overall and measure the suitability of a cooperative approach with industry to improve animal welfare outcomes in domestic red meat abattoirs, an assessment was completed in June 2013 of the current compliance situation in these abattoirs based on the issues raised at their most recent animal welfare audit. This industry sector assessment confirmed significant progress has been achieved on implementing all improvements listed in these recommendations.

The following information summarises the current situation in regards to animal welfare compliance in this sector. Furthermore this report identifies the actions that have been implemented by the Authority and licensed abattoirs in response to the recommendations listed in the original review:

Recommendation 1 - *Management oversight and commitment to compliance with the Standard needs to improve dramatically. The Authority should use its existing compliance and enforcement policy on businesses that fail to upgrade their animal welfare standards.*

At the time of the 2013 assessment, all businesses had complied significantly with upgrading documented procedures in line with Industry Animal Welfare Standards Livestock Processing Establishments requirements and were ensuring that all staff involved in the business have a commitment to animal welfare and complied with all legislative requirements. Authority audits and inspections have identified these changes within the industry and the Authority will continue to review and assess compliance with this recommendation at future audits.

Recommendation 2 - *Section 7 of AS 4696:2007 Australian Standard for the Hygienic Production and Transportation of Meat and Meat Products for Human Consumption is inadequate by itself to assess compliance with animal welfare practices as it is outcome based. Guidance material is urgently required to assist auditors and industry measure compliance in this regard.*

Industry Animal Welfare Standards Livestock Processing Establishments has been adopted as the guide and is now used by the Authority and all NSW domestic abattoirs to improve animal welfare outcomes in livestock handling and slaughtering facilities at abattoirs.

Recommendation 3 - *The Authority should make compliance with the "Industry Animal Welfare Standards – Livestock Processing Establishments – Preparing Meat For Human Consumption, Second Edition AMIC 2009" a legal requirement for all domestic red meat abattoirs.*

The NSW Food Authority updated the licence conditions on red meat abattoirs to make it a requirement that the licensee complies with the six key standards outlined in the industry manual. Furthermore, each abattoir was required to appoint an Animal Welfare Officer to monitor animal welfare at each abattoir, as part of its quality assurance system, by 31 December 2012 and for all operators involved in stunning, sticking and shackling of animals to obtain competency based training in MTM 11 Stun, Stick and Shackle course by 1 July 2013.

All abattoirs have completed this training and have fully qualified Animal Welfare Officers and accredited slaughter staff present during processing operations. The Authority is in consultation at a national level with the Primary Industries Standing Committee (PISC) to make the industry standard a legal requirements.

Recommendation 4 - *The Authority should require abattoirs to employ staff that have completed a recognised form of animal welfare training. These trained staff should be present at all times the abattoir is operating.*

Key supervisory staff involved in livestock handling and slaughtering have completed formal training, and dedicated Animal Welfare Officers (AWOs) have been appointed at each abattoir to ensure animal welfare is monitored and dealt with as part of the abattoir quality assurance system. To date all abattoirs have provided this training to multiple staff members to ensure there is always a suitably trained staff member available during processing operations.

Recommendation 5 - *Every person on the premises involved in the handling of live animals, up to the point of death, must have either completed a recognised form of animal welfare training or have been assessed as competent by an appropriately trained person.*

It is now a requirement of the Authority licence that all staff members complete mandatory training. All domestic red meat abattoirs now have fully trained AWO's present at all times and all abattoirs have completed MTM 11 training Stun, Stick and Shackle training for their employees.

Recommendation 6 - *Inadequate restraint in knocking boxes must be addressed where identified. This may result in significant costs to some businesses but is essential in providing animal welfare at this point in the slaughter process.*

All abattoirs who were issued Improvement Notices to action poor restraint in knocking boxes have introduced control measures to prevent head movement and allow for a compliant, first time stun on cattle. All abattoirs are also monitoring and actioning poor stunning techniques as part of their documented procedures to ensure continual improvement with stunning techniques and outcomes.

Recommendation 7 - *Stunning equipment, particularly electrical systems is old and poorly maintained. The industry needs to be encouraged to invest in some modern equipment.*

Agreement has been reached with abattoirs to monitor operations and document procedures that require all electrical stunning equipment be calibrated annually to ensure correct voltage, amperage and frequency is delivered through stunning equipment. There is also now a requirement in procedures for back-up stunner to be available and operational at all times.

Recommendation 8 - *Security in domestic abattoirs needs to be significantly improved.*

As at 30 June 2013 there remains one domestic abattoir that does not have CCTV surveillance cameras monitoring movements around the abattoir.

Recommendation 9 - *Five abattoirs had unacceptable animal welfare practice at the initial animal welfare review. It is recommended that those abattoirs be placed into a performance improvement program with increased unannounced audits and inspections to ensure that the measures addressed by the Improvement Notices are maintained.*

All abattoirs were subject to monthly animal welfare inspections between March 2012 and October 2012. After this time the frequency was reduced due to high levels of compliance. Animal welfare inspections were conducted separately to the normal scheduled audit program which requires all abattoirs to receive a full audit annually.

Animal welfare inspections indicate that all abattoirs are compliant with animal welfare legislative requirements. Minor issues will occasionally be identified and the Authority will continue to assess animal welfare during the audit process and liaise with these licensees to ensure that continual improvements are made and all animal welfare requirements are substantially compliant.

Recommendation 10 - *The Animal Welfare checklist developed and used during the inspection program needs to be part of the Authority's assessment system and used by Authority officers when conducting unannounced inspections and audits of abattoirs.*

The specialised Animal Welfare checklist has been incorporated into the audit checklist completed by Authority staff at all audits and inspections conducted on abattoirs and it is current policy that this checklist will be continually reviewed to ensure it is still current and able to effectively assess compliance with animal welfare requirements.

Conclusion

After one year of implementing measures to improve animal welfare outcomes, the animal welfare inspection program has confirmed that all abattoirs had substantially addressed the inspection findings and taken action to ensure they were compliant with legislative requirements. No significant animal welfare issues were outstanding at the completion of this assessment. Some abattoirs were still implementing corrective actions that were delayed due to financial constraints but these relate to minor issues and have no significance to the business's overall ability to appropriately meet animal welfare requirements. These abattoirs are continually updating the Authority on progress and expected completion dates for these issues and the Authority has agreed on the proposed actions and timeframes.

This animal welfare review has found that the programs implemented by the Authority and actions taken by licensed abattoirs have resulted in a significant improvement in animal welfare controls. All red meat domestic abattoirs in NSW are able to demonstrate compliance with animal welfare legislative requirements. The Authority will continue to conduct animal welfare assessments at abattoirs and identify issues to enable continuous improvement to be achieved.