Panel Discussion One: Front-Line Experiences With Animal Welfare, Natural Disasters, and Disease Outbreaks

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PANEL DISCUSSIONS

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Front-Line Experiences With Animal Welfare, Natural Disasters, and Disease Outbreaks

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Note:

This is the first session (edited transcript) of three panel discussions held at the University of Guelph, April 29–May 1, 2007. Panelists included Ian J. H. Duncan, Department of Animal & Poultry Science, University of Guelph; Kelli Ferris, Department of Clinical Sciences, North Carolina State University; and Victoria Bowes, Animal Health Centre, Ministry of Agriculture and Land, Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada.

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Question: Dr. Bowes, could you tell us about what backyard flock owners did with their birds after they were euthanized during the AI [avian influenza] outbreak?

Bowes: The CFIA [Canadian Food Inspection Agency] took the carcasses back with them for centralized disposal. The nice thing was that the backyard flocks were all tested, which brought us a huge amount of, not what I would want to call evidence, but at least proof that the virus was not circulating within the backyard flocks. So they took the birds back.

Question: After the AI outbreak in the Netherlands they tested a lot of the human population and they found evidence that AI had been picked up by the human body. Did they do the same in BC?

Bowes: Our Centre for Disease Control did surveys of just the workers who were involved. The problem was that they didn’t have any preexposure titers to work with, so that kind of information wasn’t gathered. I know that in the future we’ve actually planned a fairly heavy surveillance of the human population. And people may not know that we did have two confirmed clinical cases of conjunctivitis in workers who were working within the infected barns—so there was some transmission to humans. That kind of survey is planned but it was not done.

Question: My question is for Dr. Ferris. With reference to the slide you put up of the pit bull, are there certain animals or groups of animals that are not as intensively rescued or that may not be saved as often?

Ferris: That certainly wasn’t the case during Katrina. Everybody rounded up pit bulls at the same rate as everything else. What has continued to be a challenge to us after the event is that we ended up having so many animals who were not reclaimed by owners. And there were intense efforts put into trying to find rescue groups and shelters to take these animals. We didn’t really have any control over which animals were sent to us, and some of the animals had actually been housed at Animal Control because of their aggression—either inter-dog aggression or human aggression. And so now we’ve got no-kill shelters that are sort of stuck with these dogs because they’re not safe to re-home to the public.

For example, one shelter in Fayetteville, North Carolina, took six of these dogs, and they’re going to have at least three of them until the end of their natural life. When we look at their average turnover of how often they adopt animals from their shelter and the average of how long an animal stays at that shelter before being re-homed, these dogs will have an impact on future adoptions of animals in that
area. Because of these animals 1,500 adoptions of normally adoptable animals will not occur. So we have to look at the ethics of what we’re doing when we take animals that we wouldn’t re-home under normal circumstances. Some of these rescued dogs were obviously professionally fought pit bulls and we had people making emotional decisions. People were deciding that these animals deserved to get into no-kill shelters because they were flood dogs.

Duncan: When I saw your slide of the boat towing the pig, I immediately thought of The Life of Pi. You may remember the story about the young man who had to share a lifeboat with a tiger. So, maybe the pig caused problems, but it could have been worse. It could have been a tiger. What strategy did you have for dealing with exotic animals?

Ferris: Fortunately, we didn’t have to come up with a lot of that. We have some people who are really skilled at working with exotics. Dr. Greg Lewbart, who is a reptile guy at North Carolina State University, was called to go rescue an alligator from the children’s zoo in Rocky Mount. It goes back to knowing who the people are who have the resources.

We are fortunate to have the North Carolina Zoological Park. They have a lot of people who are really skilled at being able to capture, immobilize, and transport these animals. So it’s just a matter of cataloging your resources well enough to know who you can call. And then you have to be prepared for situations where under normal business operations you could manage that tiger but that maybe in the face of a disaster you’re going to have to make the decision to humanely euthanize him. Because if you can’t manage him or transport him in a humane way then you’re not really meeting his needs or wants. Again, it goes back to the idea that death is not always the worst option. Sometimes that’s a tough sell, though, to animal advocates who may be participating as volunteers or who may be in leadership positions during an event.

Question: I have a question for Dr. Duncan. Dogs live with us and I think we all appreciate that they are sentient. But I do not think that the government in Canada believes that dogs are sentient. And if they don’t believe that dogs are sentient and that agricultural animals are sentient, how can we convince them to legislate better conditions—which is what we’re all working toward? What do you think it’s going to take?

Duncan: It’s going to take an evolutionary process. Eventually the people within government will have had some education in these matters. I agree, I think they are, at the moment, fairly ignorant. But all the students at this university get a good education in these sorts of matters and I think it’s only a matter of time before the Old School get thrown out and they will be replaced with better educated, younger M.P.s [Members of Parliament] who realize that animals are sentient.
We developed a CERV [Community Emergency Response Volunteers] team this year in Middlesex County. This team consists of local volunteers within rural communities who will assist in a secondary response mode by providing services such as reception center management, registration inquiry, and basic first aid for people. Many of these people are pet owners and also farmers. Is there any basic training that we can provide to these volunteers that could assist them in animal welfare rights during emergencies?

Ferris: I think that Dr. Duncan should answer that because although a lot of us can talk about the operational side of things, when you’re working with volunteers you may run into the sorts of issues that were presented in his talk. Dr. Bowes also talked about how the public perception of what is going on can be very different from the perceptions of the operations people.

Duncan: I’m sure a very quick questionnaire would soon sort out who among your volunteers has expertise with dogs and cats and other common companion animals. Were you thinking in terms of only dealing with companion animals or were you thinking that agricultural species would be part of the scene as well?

Question: I guess our first issue, because we’re going to be dealing with people in reception centers, is the companion animals arriving with them. But in the larger sense we are dealing with a very agricultural community and we have to consider all the possibilities.

Duncan: Again, a simple questionnaire may provide a pool of people. A lot of young people will have spent some time working on a farm and will have some knowledge and expertise at handling particular species. Otherwise it’s rather difficult. I saw Crystal MacKay—educating young people is sort of your area, Crystal. …

Mackay: I’m Crystal MacKay with the Ontario Farm Animal Council and you raise an excellent question: “Is there training?” We’ve identified a huge gap in this area and we’ve brought in an expert from Alberta, Jennifer Woods, for four sessions. All of the sessions—on livestock emergencies primarily relating to transport or barn fires—were sold out. As a result, we’ve been trying to develop some written resources because each time we offer a course we have a waiting list of people and half the people who do take the course ask for a speaker to come back to their local area. We offer the course to about 40 people at a time—primarily firefighters, police, the SPCA [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] and the CFIA. These groups don’t feel that they have their training and they’re first responders. We haven’t even started to touch the volunteer teams. It is a gap that we have identified and we are trying to work on it.

A concept that’s being put forward by the chicken farmers is to put emergency response teams together that can deal with not just transport or AI, for example, but
any poultry-related emergency. When you get into specialized industries like poultry, if you’ve got a team of people who know how to deal with chickens, they can help deal with your emergency. So the concept of regional teams is just in the early stages but the key is, going back to Dr. Ferris’s comment, we can put together a great plan but then people like you need to know who to call and what to do in the event of an emergency.

Question: With reference to transportation, you have to identify where you’re going to take these animals once you’ve put them in the truck. You have to know where in the neighboring area these animals can be accommodated.

Mackay: Probably the number-one takeaway from the training is that people need to develop their own local plan of who to call. A local beef farmer, for example, just put on a full-day session for all the fire departments west of London down to Chatham. The session provided instruction on who to call in the event of an accident on Highway 401. The participants came out with specific contact information—like the cell phone number of the local TSC [Tractor supply Company] store manager so that they can arrange for gates at two in the morning. And that is just tremendous, but we’re just starting the process and there is still a lot of work to be done.

Bowes: I have a few suggestions. First of all, I would suggest taking an inventory of your volunteers’ skill sets. And there are some courses you can take on the FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] Web site that have livestock and disaster scenarios and they can give you a broad overview of how to manage some of the perils. They may not be as strong on the operational point of view. The other suggestion is to try to integrate a representative into some of the local emergency response plan exercises. If you can get into some of the tabletop exercises, you can get a working understanding about the structure of the emergency response and where you fit into it. I would also suggest that volunteers, who can sometimes come in with very high expectations, be given a clear message of what the response is going to be like. They should understand that not everyone is going to be on the rescue side of things.

Question: I have a thought and then I have a question. My thought is for Dr. Bowes. During your presentation I was thinking about Star Trek and about the Borg who came on board and talked about assimilation—which is really just death. And the term “depopulation” struck the same sort of chord with me. I just want to say that if someone came to my farm and told me that it was to be depopulated, I would find that inflammatory. Maybe those kind of terms need to be humanized.

My question is for Dr. Ferris. Given your experience working in areas of North Carolina and Katrina, can you address the correlation between human poverty and
the impact of disasters on animals? We have seen a lot of that poverty close up and its larger impact, but what does that mean for animals?

Ferris: Animals are definitely affected. For example, if you’re affluent you will probably have a vehicle that you can use to transport your animal out of the affected area. You’ll have the money to board that animal at a traditional boarding facility instead of having to seek shelter somewhere else. We know that most of our problems with irresponsible pet ownership, and those areas where Animal Control seems to spend the most time responding to calls, are in impoverished neighborhoods. This is often because of educational backgrounds or the fact that many of the people don’t have the same kinds of resources that other people have to contain their pets or to have their pets spayed or neutered.

We also have issues with, not just those living in extreme poverty, but with people who are termed as having low wealth. Their numbers are rising because, although formerly in North Carolina we were big in the textile industry and we had a really productive tobacco industry, a lot of those things have gone away. We have whole counties that were once pretty prosperous that now have many, many people with low wealth. So they just don’t have the resources and they’re just not able to respond even if they want to. The elderly can pose another challenge. And what do we do with that pet owner who has, for example, nine cats and one carrier because she never takes more than one cat to the veterinarian at a time? Trying to evacuate someone like that with one carrier—and it’s a cardboard box—can be very, very challenging.

Question: This is a question directed at Dr. Bowes and Dr. Ferris. One of the barriers to action is often the dilemma of who actually owns the animals and the whole issue of insurance. Perhaps we were able to weather the AI outbreak because of the supply management system we have in Canada. Has there been any discussion about the vulnerability of the livestock and equine industries in an emergency where there may be some question as to who is responsible for the animals? And what sort of protection is there for the people who are responding?

Bowes: We didn’t lose one poultry producer through the entire AI outbreak and I really do give credit to the Canadian marketing system. The intricacies of how they managed to make sure that all the producers stayed solvent went a long way in tempering the financial and economic impact. But I also think that people now realize that the Health of Animals Act [Department of Justice, 1990, c. 21] only provides compensation for the market value of birds. So it turns out that a lot of the noncompensatory losses do have to be covered through other disaster relief programs and through disaster assistance relief at the provincial and federal government levels. They are starting to look into things like flock insurance—but I’m not sure it’s going to go in that direction. I do know that the industry is structured quite
differently in the United States. In Canada, we don’t have contract growers and we’re not relying on integrated ownership where a large name brand like Tyson owns the whole process from start to finish. We have independent growers or producers or processing facilities. I absolutely appreciate now that the marketing system really did help out. Also, the marketing system here provided a very convenient way to communicate. One of the big issues during that outbreak was consumer confidence. The message had to get out that poultry products were still safe to eat even though we were dealing with a poultry disease. The marketing system made a phenomenal effort across the national boards to keep consumer confidence up and to allow the markets to be maintained.

Ferris: Dr. Bowes’s comments cover a lot of what is going on in the United States as well. With reference to our integrated system, if you’re a little cog in that wheel, a lot of times the corporation will take care of you and so you’ve got a cushion. It’s not going to be great but there is a mechanism for recovery that is put into the business continuity plan, and we do have plans in place. When we get producers who are outside that safety net, we have seen some remarkable response from the entire production industry in support of individual farmers. For example, in North Carolina there was a mistake made when a ration was being put together in a feed wagon for a dairy in Apex. Unfortunately pesticide was added to the feed wagon instead of the mineral mix and the entire dairy herd died a pretty terrible death. But the farmer who owned those cows didn’t purchase a single individual replacement. Dairy farmers from the entire southeast responded and replaced his cows. So I think that’s pretty remarkable. As an industry I think that we’re pretty good at taking care of each other. Farmers have been doing that for a long time and they have a culture of helping each other. We don’t always wait for the government to show up and assist us.

Question: Dr. Bowes, have any of the lessons learned from the AI outbreak been used to implement strategies for coping with outbreaks in developing countries? And what has been learned about how much emphasis is put on humane euthanasia?

Bowes: I think the applicability of our experience is really shared among more developed nations like the Netherlands or Italy. We have intensive livestock, and that’s generally where diseases are focused. It’s a very, very different issue in Asia. They have a whole different dynamic for outbreaks. Not a lot of our privileged response really translates very well to their situation. I do think of them as very independent events.

The emphasis on animal welfare was really a phoenix out of the ashes of the AI outbreak. We have recognized, obviously too late for our situation, but as a consequence of our situation, that animal welfare concerns have risen up and are being addressed. I do have to give credit to the CFIA for recognizing that whole barn gas-
sing of waterfowl didn’t work the first time, and it didn’t work the second time. And they also recognized that within the CFIA they have limited expertise to draw upon. So they set the net out and expanded and put together a specific working group on humane euthanasia issues. Dr. Raj is here and he was a key member of that. Science is now being brought over. There is some experimentation being done in the States as well and, I have to caution a bit, they’re exploring some areas that make me a little uncomfortable—like the use of firefighting foam.

Firefighting foam will do the job, and maybe in the end it’s all the same, you’re taking the life of an animal. Whether you call it depopulation or putting them down, we all struggle as veterinarians with that term, but it all means the same thing in the end. But when you want to talk about getting compliance, I guess you need to be sensitive. Last year a Canadian poultry research group got together to identify some key areas for research to focus on, and the input from across the country identified mass euthanasia of poultry as a significant area to target. I think we’re going to start to see some very important developments and I’m sure Dr. Raj will bring it all together for us later.