

# *An Integrator's Perspective on Animal Welfare*

*Collette Schultz Kaster*

---

## **Company Philosophy**

Premium Standard Farms, Inc. (PSF) is a vertically integrated pork production company with farms, feedmills, transportation and processing plants in Missouri, North Carolina and Texas. Because of this scope, a broad effort is necessary to ensure animal welfare receives the attention and focus it is due at all levels.

This has always been an area of focus for PSF, but the entire industry has been moved to a new level of awareness in recent years through pressure from customers, consumer groups and animal welfare organizations. We spend a lot of time looking around the world for better ideas, equipment and methodology. Premium Standard Farms, Inc. has applied this philosophy to its entire operation.

Animal welfare is a matter of ethics and economics. Most of our employees have an extensive background in animal agriculture and recognize that good animal welfare is a critical component of their jobs. Handling is a critical part of raising and processing pigs and contributes to:

- Employee and Animal Well-Being
- Basic Needs of Animals
- Customer and Regulatory Expectations
- Meat Quality
- Personnel Safety
- Production Efficiencies

Recent issues have pushed this area into prominence in the United States, although it has been gaining momentum in Europe and especially the United Kingdom for the last decade. Now many companies are striving to be leaders in this area. Common production practices are being scrutinized requiring new efforts by companies to ensure they are meeting the ever-shifting definition of animal welfare.

---

*Collette Schultz Kaster\**  
*Premium Standard Farms, Inc.*  
*22123 Hwy 5*  
*Milan, MO 63556*

*collette@psfarms.com*

*Proceedings of the 55<sup>th</sup> Reciprocal Meat Conference (2002)*

---

## **Live Production**

Live pork production is typically divided into sow farms and grow finish facilities. Nurseries may be attached to sow farms or may be independent sites. Each type of animal requires unique care systems.

### *Breeding Animals and Young Pigs*

Each group must be handled in a fashion appropriate to their condition (age, mobility, size) while ensuring the safety of the people. Proper equipment and training is essential. This is an area of pig production where stockmanship or husbandry skills are really put to use. There is a renewed interest in cultivating these talents. We are testing one such system, which works with employees to train them on positive interactions with livestock with the anticipated benefit to pigs, people and production traits.

Common practices in these age groups such as processing techniques (castration, tail docking and teeth clipping), weaning age and sow housing are being reconsidered. Procedures for euthanasia must be in place and regularly monitored. These procedures must be specific to the size and age, and ensure the safety of the employees as well.

### *Grow Finish*

Water, feed and ventilation are the basics of good animal care in this category. Sick or injured pigs must be rapidly identified, isolated and treated. Walking pens may get pigs accustomed to people and new activities and can be done while checking feeders and water.

### *Load Out Crews*

Pigs should be loaded at appropriate times for the weather conditions. Personnel should be trained to load out pigs, and crews should be scheduled so they do not become over-fatigued. Pigs should be moved in small groups using sort boards and should be kept moving as continuously as possible. Watch footing and add additional sawdust if chutes or alleys become slick during loading.

### *Transportation*

Trucks should be clean with good footing and bedding if necessary. Use trained drivers and trucking companies who are accustomed to hauling pigs. Programs such as Trucker Quality Assurance may be used as a criterion for approval. Ventilation should be kept cooler rather than warmer for the comfort of the market hog especially during spring and fall when temperatures are fluctuating.

Premium Standard Farms, Inc. uses trailers with wide, side unloading doors in its Missouri facility. These wide doors open directly into the barn, which greatly facilitates unloading by reducing stress and time compared to conventional chutes.

## Processing Plants

Animal handling had been an area that was not traditionally emphasized in packing plants. This area had been considered mainly to ensure that efficiencies were maximized with no “holes” in the line. The movement toward greater emphasis on handling was initially driven by the association of handling with meat quality, especially in pork. Additionally as new plants came on line in the late 80’s and 90’s, they were built with attention to animal handling areas. Most existing plants have been retrofitted with improved handling areas and equipment as well.

There is a great deal of information in the literature and from trade associations that can be used for education on pre-slaughter handling and stunning. These materials also include sample audits that may be used to measure and track performance in this area. These audits can be modified for each operation, or style of handling.

### *Receiving*

Waiting times to unload trucks should be as short as possible. Pigs should be off the truck in less than thirty minutes in hot weather or DOA’s will increase. If times are consistently longer, then methods to cool during the waiting period should be considered. Temperatures, airflow and use of sprinklers in lairage should be monitored and if temperatures are high, pigs should be showered on arrival.

Watering systems should be checked regularly to confirm they are working. Noise should be minimized when removing groups from lairage to allow others to rest. Our internal data show that resting times of at least an hour show an improvement in quality traits. However, the preferred minimum is two hours.

### *Pre-Slaughter Handling*

This is an area that requires special management, as supervisors need to understand and work well with people, pigs and equipment. It is difficult to impart to employees that handling matters when they know that it is only a very short time before the animal is slaughtered. The manager for this area must be able to counter that thinking, as well as to balance good handling with the pressure for efficiencies.

Facilities must be managed for lighting, airflow and noise. Equipment in this area must be carefully maintained so that pigs are moved safely and comfortably and that insensibility is achieved. Many different types of devices have been tried to move pigs including: whips, slappers, flags, paddles, panels, and “witch’s cape.” Holding pens must not be overcrowded and this can be difficult to prove to employees that it does save time. Movement and stunning of stressed animals whether they come off trucks or

in the plant should be done in accordance with the USDA-FSIS Directive and Code of Federal Regulations at a minimum.

## Audits and Verification

“If you don’t measure it, you can’t improve it” or “if you don’t document it, you didn’t do it”. Audits are an important way to verify you are doing what you say you are doing. Additional assessment tools such as statistical process control charts (SPC) are very useful to illustrate trends. Internal documents have been developed that guide our employees on proper handling procedures including company guidelines and Standard Operating Procedure’s. Employees know that they will be audited and this level of awareness is beneficial. Customers come in routinely and audit plants and it appears that they may soon be auditing farms as well. We have developed audits for farms and employees are cross-trained to go between farms to audit one another. Many trade organizations are creating their own audits for live production as well.

## Training

All employees are made aware of the importance of animal handling during the orientation process. Employees assigned to lairage and pre-slaughter handling should receive additional training and be qualified to handle livestock. This training should include handling techniques, company and USDA regulations, and information on carcass and meat quality defects. Certificates or hardhat stickers are used to recognize who has been trained, and this is verified during audits. This helps eliminate the use of light duty or “unassigned” personnel in this area. Substitute employees must be trained as well, especially those working in proximity of animal handlers such as shacklers, stickers, utility and trainers. Supervisors require additional training and dialogue so they can properly oversee these practices. In addition, a strong disciplinary system should be in place so that clear actions are taken in case of animal handling infractions.

Employees in this area are an excellent resource for making improvements to processes. Involve them in any design changes or to trouble shoot problems.

- Data should be shared on key measurements of animal handling including:
- DOA’s and Stress Pigs by Driver, Farm and Genotype
- Carcass Damage: Bruising and Cut Outs
- Dead and Stressed in Pens
- Daily Meat Quality: Color and pH (Initial and Ultimate)
- Run charts of audit data (e.g. insensibility and prod use)

## Emerging Issues

Premium Standard Farms, Inc. and the livestock industry have moved quickly to put in audits and procedures in place to ensure animal welfare. This area will likely continue to gain attention and may include new actions in antibiotic usage and animal production. We as producers of meat have an obligation to ensure the well being of our animals. New methods and approaches will continue to be added quickly.

## References

- Grandin, Temple. 2002. Recommended Animal Handling Guidelines for Meat Packers. 2002 Edition. AMI Foundation.
- National Pork Board. 2001. Trucker Quality Assurance<sup>SM</sup> Program.
- Livestock Conservation Institute. Livestock Trucking Guide.
- ProHand Stock Person Training Program. Monash University, Agriculture Victoria, Pig Research and Development Corporation. Australia.
- USDA-Food Safety and Inspection Service. 2001. Humane Handling of Disabled Livestock. FSIS Directive 6900.1 Revision 1.