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Behind the Scenes of the Standards Review Snapshot of livestock issues

The process of reviewing the Canadian Organic Standards every five years gives Canadians, whether they are farmers, organic inspectors or consumers, the chance to have their say in how we define “organic.” The review is a time-consuming job, but well worth the effort, as the updated standards reflect the current technology and products.

Here is a glimpse of the work done behind the scenes – a snapshot of the Livestock Working Group, which is chaired by François Labelle and includes ranchers, farmers, organic inspectors, agronomists and a veterinarian.

By Janet Wallace



As a freelance writer and editor specializing in organic agriculture and past livestock farmer, I’m honoured to be part of this group as the representative of Canadian Organic Growers.

Our role is to provide a recommendation to the voting members of the CGSB Committee on Organic Agriculture (often called the Technical Committee) as to whether we should reject, accept or modify the proposed changes.

Before our meeting, all 20 members of the working group receive a link to a Google spreadsheet that contains petitions to change the standards. Each petition includes the current wording of the relevant section of the standards, the proposed change in wording, and the rationale behind the change.

We can all add comments on the proposed changes and read, and respond to, everyone else's feedback. We can also do background research on the issues.

Next step is the meeting organized by the secretary of the review, Marc-Antoine Larrivée. The participants, from across Canada, connect on a conference call. We talk on the phone while working on the spreadsheets online. We discuss the merits of each proposal. Sometimes there is unanimous rejection or acceptance right from the start. This seems to happen more often when we reject the proposal because we all feel the proposal is unrealistic or weakens the standards.

More often, we engage in lengthy, passionate but respectful, discussions. Sometimes we realize we need to do more background research or even ask the petitioner for more details if the request is unclear.

As a new participant in this process, I am amazed at how well the meetings work. We can start a meeting with a wide range of views, yet end up with consensus. It's not that one person pushes their opinion on other people or that a dissenting opinion is drowned out by the majority, instead this is a wonderful democratic process where we discuss the issues with respect.

People may enter the discussion with strong views but also with open minds. Consequently, their opinions may change after hearing other perspectives. If not, we may alter the proposed change so we can all feel comfortable with it. It is really quite a remarkable process.

Examples of ruminant petitions



Should dehorning goats be prohibited?

We received a petition to prohibit the practice of dehorning because, according to the petitioner, "Dehorning is the amputation of an important member for the goat. The horns allow them to communicate with each other, to scratch and are part of their metabolism and psychic balance."

We decided that for the safety of the goats and farmers, we would not accept the petition but were swayed to change the standards.* Debudding (disbudding) or the removal of horn buds will be allowed, but dehorning will only be allowed if it is "the only remaining option."

For both procedures, "consideration shall be given to the use of anaesthetics, sedatives and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory analgesics, such as lidocaine, xylazine, and ketoprofen" (6.6.4c). The procedures must also meet the requirements of the applicable Code of Practice (National Farm Animal Care Council's best practices for the care and handling of livestock www.nfacc.ca/codes-of-practice).

Can milk from cows treated with antibiotics be given to organic calves?

On organic dairy farms, antibiotics can be given to dairy animals in emergencies when the farmer has written instructions from a vet. After the last dose, farmers must wait at least thirty days or twice the milk withdrawal period listed on the label, whichever is longer, before the cow's milk can be considered organic.



(Also, milk from cows that have received more than two treatments of veterinary drugs in a year, whether antibiotics or parasiticides, is not organic for a year after the last treatment (6.6.10 e 2).

Currently, organic calves must be given fresh whole organic milk or reconstituted organic milk until they're three months old (6.4.3 c). The petition suggested that we change the standards to allow the use of milk in part of this withdrawal period to feed organic calves.

The working group discussed many aspects to this issue. The working group don't want antibiotics, even antibiotic residues in milk, given to organic meat animals. (Once an animal receives even one treatment of antibiotics, it cannot be sold as organic meat.) However, we don't like the waste involved on a dairy farm if a cow must receive antibiotics and her milk is discarded for more than a month.

The proposed revision: calves can be fed milk from an organic cow that received the treatment but only after twice the label withdrawal requirement or 14 days (whichever is longer). This reduces the waste of organic milk. This proposal is consistent with the withdrawal times for antibiotics in other organic livestock production.



Should tie stalls be allowed in dairy barns?

Organic dairies let their cows graze on pasture from spring to fall. At night, during inclement weather and/or during the winter, cows may be in barns. Most organic cows in Canada are in loose housing, where cows roam around the barn. Some organic dairies, however, use tie stalls. The cows, which can stand up and lie down but not turn around, are tethered with food and water in front of them. They are milked in this position.

The current standards allow the use of existing tie stall barns under various restrictions, but tie stalls are not allowed in new construction or after major barn renovations. Also, dry cows and heifers are not allowed to be in tie stalls. Lactating cows kept in tie stalls need "an exercise period every day whenever possible, or at least twice a week." (6.12.1)

The Working Group discussed whether the standards should require more exercise periods and whether we should impose an end date to the allowance of tie stalls.

This discussion that followed is a perfect example of the issues the working groups and committee face when evaluating the standards.

Animal welfare is a critical part of organic livestock operations. Organic farmers and the members of the Livestock Working Group want organic livestock to be treated well, and so do organic consumers.



If animal welfare was our only concern, we would ban tie stalls outright. However, we also need to be practical. Building a new loose housing dairy barn can cost easily 1 million dollars for a 50-cow herd. Some of the tie stall dairies that went through organic transition already invested heavily to build exercise facilities to accommodate 1/3 of their herd at one time to meet the requirement of twice-weekly exercise.

If we change the standards so that cows need to be exercised more often, these operations will need to invest in more infrastructure for exercise and still need to build a new loose housing dairy barn a few years later. If we ban tie stalls by 2020 (something we're not considering), some dairies will likely either go back to conventional or go out of business. If we ban them by 2025, 2030 or later, we give farmers a chance to prepare.

So what should we do? The challenge is finding the balance between what we want in the long run while ensuring the standards are still practical. We are discussing options such as increasing the exercise requirement and putting an end to the use of tie stall barns by 2025, 2030 or later.

What do you think of these issues?

The Committee on Organic Agriculture will hear 27 recommendations from the Working Groups on October 29th. The OFC will publish a report describing the recommendations and will invite you to submit your comments.

Stay tuned!

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