

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Humane livestock handling and slaughter regs through the years

The issue of the humane handling and slaughter of livestock is not a recent concern triggered by videos that shock the public. Rather the issue goes back as far as the Eisenhower Administration when, in 1958, Congress passed the Humane Slaughter Act (HMSA). In that act Congress “declared [it] to be the policy of the United States that the slaughtering of livestock and the handling of livestock in connection with slaughter shall be carried out only by humane methods.”

Twenty years later, “Congress amended the HMSA in 1978 to provide USDA the authority to inspect slaughterhouses for compliance with the HMSA and to penalize violators.”

It was to be another 24 years when the 2002 Farm Bill included Section 10305 which stated: “It is the sense of Congress that the Secretary of Agriculture should—(1) continue tracking the number of violations of ... [HMSA] and report the results and relevant trends annually to Congress; and (2) fully enforce HMSA by ensuring that humane methods in the slaughter of livestock—(A) prevent needless suffering; (B) result in safer and better working conditions for persons engaged in slaughtering operations; (C) bring about improvement of products and economies in slaughtering operations; and (D) produce other benefits for producers, processors, and consumers that tend to expedite an orderly flow of livestock and livestock products in interstate and foreign commerce.”

In September 2004, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) issued a notice entitled “Humane Handling and Slaughter Requirements and the Merits of a Systematic Approach to Meet Such Requirements.” In that notice, the FSIS stated it “is issuing this notice because there has been considerable congressional and public interest about the humane treatment of animals, and because the number of humane handling noncompliance incidents documented by FSIS in establishments has increased over the last three years.”

The summary of the notice says, “FSIS believes a systematic approach is beneficial in meeting these requirements [HMSA and the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA)] and through this notice is encouraging livestock slaughter establishments to use a systematic approach to humane handling and slaughter to best ensure that they meet the requirements of the HMSA, FMIA, and implementing regulations.”

Another 9 years later in October the FSIS issued the first edition of the “FSIS Compliance Guidelines for a Systematic Approach to the Humane Handling of Livestock” (Guidelines). The preface of that document states, “The FSIS has published this guide to assist

establishments in complying with humane handling requirements. This guide represents the Agency’s current thinking on a systematic approach to humane handling of livestock. FSIS encourages slaughter establishments to use the guide.”

The guidelines states that the “FSIS believes that the following four elements represent a systematic approach to humane handling and slaughter of livestock. Under a SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO HUMANE HANDLING AND SLAUGHTER (emphasis in original), establishments should: 1) assess the ability of their livestock handling and slaughter practices to minimize distress and injury to livestock, 2) design facilities and implement handling practices that minimize distress and injury to livestock, 3) periodically evaluate facilities and handling methods to ensure that they continue to minimize distress and injury to livestock, 4) When necessary, modify facilities and handling methods to ensure that they continue to minimize distress and injury to livestock.”

According to Guidelines, “the systematic approach does not include a written program or records. FSIS evaluates an establishment’s systematic approach through observation of operations and discussion of humane handling with establishment personnel.”

In contrast to the systematic approach, the FSIS describes “a robust systematic approach to humane handling and slaughter [which] adds to the four elements by incorporating three additional features:” 1) written procedures, 2) written records, and 3) an FSIS review of these procedures and records.

The FSIS then fleshes out three steps for “Creating a Robust Systematic Humane Handling and Slaughter Plan.” The three steps are 1) conduct an assessment, 2) create a written plan, and 3) create a recordkeeping system.”

The Guidelines then include a set of attachments that describe 1) nine Humane Activities Tracking Activities “that address all of the regulations covering the humane handling and slaughter of livestock,” 2) a sample assessment tool, and 3) a sample plan that might be developed by a small slaughter facility.

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