

Preparing Farms for the FARM Program Evaluation

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Animal welfare is becoming more of a key concern for consumers due to an increasing interest in how their food is produced and in the environment in which it is produced. This concern has created a need for greater transparency from farmers regarding their daily farm practices. Programs were established to fulfill this need and were designed to ensure farmers use best management practices while gaining the consumer's trust. The Farmers Assuring Responsible Management (FARM) program was created in 2009 to help farmers demonstrate their dedication to animal care, environmental and antibiotic stewardship, and food safety. As of 2016, 98 percent of milk produced in the U.S. originated on dairies enrolled in the FARM program. Examples of other evaluation programs include the Dean Foods Dairy Stewardship Program, Certified Humane, Food Alliance and American Grass Fed Association. However, these evaluation programs cannot be substituted for one another. This fact sheet focuses on preparing farmers for questions and the documentation of their management practices needed for participating in the FARM evaluation.

The goal of the FARM program is to assure consumers that dairy farmers raise and care for their animals in a humane and

ethical manner. Unlike other programs, the FARM program does not use a "pass or fail" system. Instead, it promotes continuous improvement of management practices in areas like calf care, pain management, nonambulatory animal management, euthanasia, etc. Second- and third-party evaluations are used to assess the farm's management practices. An evaluator who has completed and passed the FARM training and has an established relationship with the farm will assess it and provide feedback at least once every three years. This approach is a second-party verification.

Every year the program randomly picks approximately 100 farms for a third-party verification, which is conducted by an evaluator who has no relationship with the farm. A third-party verification ensures that all evaluators within the FARM program are consistent with and accurate in their evaluations. On the day of the evaluation, the FARM evaluator generally will begin by discussing management practices with the farmer and reviewing the herd health plan. After, the evaluator will conduct a live cow and calf welfare assessment. These two areas of the FARM program help the evaluators provide suggestions for improving cow and calf well-being.

Documents Needed for the Evaluation

The FARM program has three minimum criteria that must be met at the time of evaluation or the farmer is considered noncompliant with the program. These are called mandatory corrective action plans (MCAP). If these three criteria are not fulfilled at the time of evaluation, the farmer has one year to become compliant. Otherwise, he or she faces probation or suspension from the program. Two of the MCAPs involve documentation: a veterinary client patient relationship (VCPR) form and documents of training and cow care/ethics for all employees. The farmer and veterinarian should sign the VCPR form annually. This document ensures a relationship has been established with a veterinarian and that he or she is aware of the herd's health status and is part of an individual cow's care when necessary. Also, the farmer and each hired employee should sign a form annually stating the employee has received proper training in their responsibilities on the farm. All employees must receive training in:

Stockmanship

- Low stress handling techniques during pen movement and to and from the parlor.
- Low stress handling and restraint of calves.

Calf care

- Daily nutritional requirements.
- Esophageal tube feeding.
- Identification of ill calves.

Nonambulatory cow management

- Movement of nonambulatory cows.
- Medical treatment.

Euthanasia

- Identification of animals needing to be euthanized.
- Proper euthanasia techniques.

Immediate family members are not required to sign any training documents; however, it is highly encouraged. Employee training plays a critical role in the farm's success as it keeps daily functioning of the farm running smoothly while promoting cow welfare and instating a zero-tolerance rule for abuse. When employees sign the ethics and training agreement forms, they are indicating that they understand how to perform their tasks properly and that they will not abuse an animal; if they see abuse they should report it to their supervisor. These documents are highly beneficial to the farmer as they can serve as a safety net from any videos or images released to the media. If a negative video or image were released, responsibility would fall on the employee rather than the farmer because he/she signed the ethics and training agreement forms. The FARM program provides a VCPR form, training agreement and ethics agreement in English and Spanish at nationaldairyfarm.com/resource-library if farmers wish to use them. The third MCAP states that tail docking is prohibited after January 1, 2017. Farms with cows that were tail docked before this date will not be penalized.

Have a Herd Health Plan

The herd health plan is a series of written protocols covering all tasks completed with the animals on the farm. These protocols should be written and reviewed annually and be easily accessed by any employee who needs them; therefore, protocols may need to be provided in multiple languages. Along with mandatory corrective action plans, the

FARM program also has continuous improvement plans (CIP). There are four written protocols and guidelines (newborn/milk-fed dairy calves, pain management, nonambulatory animal management and euthanasia) that fall under this category. If the farmer does not have these written protocols readily available or follow these guidelines, then the evaluator will work with him or her to improve these areas prior to the next evaluation. In this case, the farmer is not penalized. Listed below is information the four written protocols must include and management practices that should be followed:

Newborn/Milk-fed Dairy Calves

- Calves must be disbudded before 8 weeks of age.
- Recommendations for pain mitigation provided by the herd veterinarian.
- Other medical procedures (i.e., castration and extra teat removal) must be done at the earliest age possible and with pain mitigation provided by the herd veterinarian.

Pain Management

- Identification of animals in need of pain mitigation.
- Procedures for pain management in calves, heifers and cows.

Nonambulatory Animal Management

- Proper movement and the equipment to be used.
- Access to feed, water, shelter/shade, isolation from other cows, and protection from predators at all times.
- Provide prompt medical care.
- Criteria for when euthanasia should occur.

Euthanasia

- Designated and trained employees for recognizing an animal needing to be euthanized.
- Trained on proper euthanasia techniques.
- Carcass disposal that complies with local regulations.
- Record mortalities (euthanasia or natural) and their causes.

These management practice guidelines were developed by academic experts, veterinarians and dairy farmers. Written protocols are beneficial on farms of all sizes and for farms with or without employees for several reasons. First, the family may be away from the farm for a few days or an emergency/accident may occur, so someone who does not typically perform the daily on-farm tasks has to take care of the farm. Second, creating protocols may help clarify what the farmer does, why they do it, and when they do it, to remain consistent with management practices. It may also help a farmer decide whether they want to conduct a practice differently than they have in the past. Third, written protocols can be beneficial in a court of law. If a farmer is taken to court for a certain management practice on their farm, he or she can show they have a protocol stating what should be done and that this protocol is acceptable with FARM standards. Fourth, written protocols play a crucial role in successful employee training and ensure that all employees receive the same information. Also, employees are able to refer back to protocols for completing tasks when needed. If the proper information and management practices are conveyed in the protocol, good cow welfare is promoted because employees understand proper handling and care of the animals.

Furthermore, good cow welfare can improve overall herd performance and farm efficiency. Farmers can find a complete version of the management practice guidelines (Version 3.0, *Animal Care Reference Manual*) and a template of a herd health plan in English and Spanish on the FARM program website at nationaldairyfarm.com/resource-library. If protocols are already written, this is a great resource for confirming that all of the necessary information is included. Existing protocols should include the same areas provided by the FARM program document.

The On-Farm Meeting

During the evaluation of the farm, typically the evaluator will first have a conversation with the farmer to better understand how the farm is managed. For example, it is likely that the evaluator will not observe a calf being tube fed while he or she is on the farm, but it is one of the many important aspects of calf management. Therefore, the evaluator may have a conversation with the farmer about whether or not they tube feed calves, when they decide a calf will be tube fed, and how the calf is tube fed. This portion of the evaluation also focuses on the critical documents discussed above, posting of emergency contact information on the farm, and the written herd health plan. The questions asked should all be answerable through written documentation and protocols. Sending all protocols to the evaluator before the evaluation is helpful,

so they have time to look over them carefully and prepare any further questions. This will also save time in completing the evaluation. During their on-farm observations, evaluators will be looking to ensure employees perform their tasks as they are written in the protocol.

Keys to Acing the Evaluation

Preparation by the farmer can help the evaluation run smoothly and successfully. Before the evaluation, the VCPR must be signed by the herd veterinarian and the farmer for the assessment year. Also, a form must be signed by all employees and the farmer documenting the employees have received proper training for their tasks and cow care/ethics. Both of these documents are required to remain in good standing with the FARM program. Farmers should also have their herd health plan ready. A good herd health plan will ensure that all tasks related to the animals on the farm are completed. The FARM program provides great resources and templates for all of these documents on their website at nationaldairyfarm.com/resource-library. Preparation of all documents makes it easier on the farmer and the evaluator on the day of the evaluation, especially if these documents are sent to the evaluator beforehand. Together, the FARM program and dairy farmers can assure consumers that farmers raise and care for their animals in a humane and ethical manner.



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