

Phibro Young Lot Feeder Achiever of the Year
Finalist essay

A risk matrix for our future

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The Australian beef industry is currently experiencing a challenging period, with tough export trading conditions driven by a consistently high Australian dollar, and industry practices and credibility in the limelight as the live export industry tries to find its way out of a disastrous situation. For lot feeders, the dollar is proving the biggest obstacle in continuing to move meat overseas, but this should not disguise the increased focus from consumers and animal rights groups on the methods of production for intensive animal industries.

The Australian Feedlot Industry is continuing to move with the times and ensure that its credibility is maintained by being open with consumers regarding the methods of production and 'what happens in a feedlot'. This appears to be supported by most producers, and is timely given the 'new age' consumers' desire to know as much as possible about the origin of their food. The industry can do nothing in terms of controlling the fate of the Australian dollar, so let's continue to focus on what we can control – the credibility of our product and the 'image' of our industry.

Let's now focus on the issues which may compromise the credibility of our industry. Animal welfare - most notably the risk of morbidity or mortality through respiratory disease, lameness, injuries, bulling and feed related disorders. Environmental - including manure management, pen surface management and the risk of cast animals, dust, odour and environmental contamination. Transportation to slaughter - morbidity and mortality through stress, injuries, travel time, handling and time off feed and water.

There is no doubt much individual company work is happening on these issues, but as an industry it is diligent to always consider the bigger picture. How are we placed as an industry to deal with a 'revelation' that just one producer is not abiding by the rules, risking the credibility of the whole industry if consumers decide that this must be common practice?

A risk assessment matrix, developed through consultation of industry members who have concerns over practices that could be potential targets for consumers' focus or animal rights group attention, would be a good start. Are we ready, as an industry, with a 'ready to go response' if a news report reveals an issue that could compromise our credibility? For some of the issues listed above I feel we would be well prepared, but is there an issue out there we are not thinking about? It may well be that we are scrutinized for something that is not obvious to us as producers, but hits a nerve with consumers.

Any project that benefits the whole of industry, no matter how large or small the producer, and protects the credibility and integrity of our product in times of consumer or media focus, should be easily justified among members. We have to focus on what we can control, and in this case we can control our response to adverse consumer or media attention – so as an industry let's start identifying and planning what we may be defending in the future.