

Global Animal Partnership's 5-Step™ Animal Welfare Rating Standards: a welfare-labelling scheme that allows for continuous improvement

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Abstract

One challenge with animal welfare assessment programmes is that standards that make a meaningful difference to welfare can be difficult for a broad spectrum of producers to meet, thereby preventing many from engaging at all. Global Animal Partnership's (GAP's) 5-Step™ Animal Welfare Rating Standards are unique in that they are designed as a multi-tiered system that encourages continuous welfare improvement. The 5-Step program allows for a wide variety of production models — from small farms raising fewer than 50 animals in extensive, outdoor systems to larger, indoor operations raising tens of millions — and allows producers to move up the Steps as they choose. Each additional Step provides a four-fold benefit: the animals have improved welfare, the producer has the opportunity of greater rewards and more accurate representation of her or his farming practices, retailers can provide wider product selection to meet their customer demands, and consumers have the guarantee of ever-increasing, welfare-friendly choices as well as a transparent source of information on how their meat was raised. GAP began piloting its 5-Step program in 2008 with comprehensive on-farm/on-ranch and transport standards for meat chickens, pigs and beef cattle in an exclusive, two-year partnership with Whole Foods Market (WFM), North America's largest natural-foods grocer. The variety of farms and ranches supplying WFM provided a thorough testing ground for the programme. Chicken, pork, beef and turkey products ranging from Step 1 to Step 5+ are available regionally in WFM stores in the USA and Canada. Having successfully completed this pilot phase with WFM, GAP is now negotiating with other retailers, both restaurants and grocers, as well as further-processors, in North America and beyond. The essence of the Steps is captured by the following phrases: Step 1 — no crowding, cages or crates; Step 2 — an enriched environment; Step 3 — enhanced outdoor access; Step 4 — pasture centred; Step 5 — animal-centred: bred for the outdoors; and Step 5+ — animal-centred: entire life on the same farm. As of 1 December 2011, more than 1,740 third-party audited and certified farms and ranches are raising more than 140 million animals annually according to GAP's 5-Step Animal Welfare Rating Standards.

Keywords: animal welfare, beef cattle, continuous improvement, meat chickens, pigs, turkeys

Introduction

Several animal welfare-labelling schemes currently operate in Europe and North America. The oldest of these is the 'Freedom Food' scheme operated by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (2011) and launched in the UK in 1994. 'Certified Humane' (2011) is an example of an American scheme started in 2003, and 'SPCA Certified' a smaller Canadian scheme run by the British Columbia SPCA (2011). While some of these existing programmes have been successful in engaging both producers and consumers, many tend to cater only to a niche market or simply codify mainstream, commercial practices that arguably do not focus on the welfare of the animals. Standards that make a meaningful difference to animal welfare can be difficult for a broad spectrum of producers to meet, thereby preventing many from engaging at all. As

such, many welfare programmes tend to attract only a few of the best producers or do not encourage practices that result in higher animal welfare. Global Animal Partnership (GAP) was founded in 2008 as a non-profit charitable organisation with the aim of facilitating and encouraging continuous improvement in farm animal production, primarily through its signature initiative — a multi-tiered, welfare-rating system that, it was hoped, would widely engage the agricultural community, both small and large producers raising animals in diverse conditions.

Understanding that many stakeholders are concerned about the welfare of farm animals, GAP's leadership is aptly diverse, including members from the farming and ranching sector, retail, and academia, as well as leading animal advocacy NGOs. Similarly, the development and execution of GAP's 5-Step program also engage myriad voices. As an

Table 1 The number of farms certified to GAP 5-Step Standards as of 1 December 2011.

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 5+	Total
Cattle sites	449	62	n/a	305	0	0	816
Chicken farms	15	312	68	38	5	0	483
Pig farms	335	70	42	29	0	1	477
Turkey farms	1	1	8	1	1	1	13
Total	800	445	118	373	6	2	1,744

example, the 5-Step Animal Welfare Rating Pilot Standards for Turkeys was launched in late summer 2011 after an exhaustive consultative process that solicited expert guidance from producers, scientists, veterinarians, retail representatives, as well as public comment prior to review and ratification by GAP's Board of Directors. GAP maintains that the most effective way to achieve its mission of bringing about continuous improvement in the welfare of farm animals is through a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process.

The 5-Step™ Program

The 5-Step™ Animal Welfare Rating Standards program is a multi-tiered system that, through its very design, promotes continuous improvement in animal agriculture. Each set of tiered standards — from Step 1 to Step 5+ — has its own requirements that must be met before certification to that particular Step level is assigned, if appropriate. Each Step rating has its own distinct label affixed on products that identifies the particular Step level achieved. In contrast to single-tiered schemes, the 5-Step program: (1) encourages and inspires producers to move up the welfare ladder, if they so choose; (2) enables a broad spectrum of producers to become involved in the programme, rather than a minority segment of a niche agricultural community that may meet a single set of standards; (3) allows for a range of products at different Step levels; (4) more accurately and justly recognises producers for their welfare practices, instead of singularly classifying diverse farming practices and models under one label; and (5) better informs consumers about the production systems they may choose to support.

GAP launched its 5-Step program with comprehensive on-farm/on-ranch and transport standards for meat chickens, pigs and beef cattle in June 2008. Standards for turkeys were added in August 2011.

The Steps

The entry level into the 5-Step program, Step 1, was designed to engage a wide range of producers, while requiring meaningful, yet more easily attainable, production practices to improve animal welfare. At Step 1, cages and crates are prohibited, and space must be provided to enable animals to perform such natural behaviour as extending their limbs and moving about freely without obstruction from one another. Additional species-specific standards include prohibiting tail docking and teeth clipping of pigs, and meeting a set hock-burn threshold for chickens and maximum age at castration for calves.

Step 2 moves beyond Step 1 by requiring enrichments, the provision of additions to the animals' environment that encourages the expression of natural behaviour. Cattle must be provided with scratching/grooming posts, and pigs must be given enrichments that encourage foraging behaviour and oral manipulation. Typical enrichments for chickens include straw or hay bales positioned throughout the house to allow them to roost, forage, and hide and isolate themselves, as well as scattered whole grains. Many chicken producers, thinking originally that they would enter the programme at Step 1, realised that providing simple, yet important, enrichments made Step 2 more easily achievable. Indeed, the majority elected to move up the welfare ladder. To-date, there are very few certified chicken farms at Step 1 and hundreds at Step 2 (see Table 1). This is evidence that the aim of promoting continuous improvement is actually working.

Step 3 is the first tier requiring access to the outdoors and, more specifically, to an enhanced outdoor area, ie not simply a bare concrete yard. Chicken and pig producers commonly provide foraging materials to their outdoor pens. There is no Step 3 for beef cattle.

Step 4 is pasture-centred, with the term 'pasture' defined broadly as an outdoor area that provides ample foraging opportunities, rather than restricted to an open, grassy field. The species-specific needs and preferences of the animals must be met in the outdoor area. For example, while a meadow may be an ideal environment for cattle, chickens may be more suited to a wooded area with scattered leaves and litter covering the forest floor. It is often forgotten that domestic fowl are derived from jungle fowl (Crawford 1990) which, as their name implies, live in thick tropical jungle. Pigs in Step 4 systems are often raised in wooded areas or fields that have been harvested of grain crops or root crops, providing them with rich foraging areas.

A primary difference between Step 3 and Step 4 is access: in Step 3, animals live indoors and are given access to the outdoors, whereas Step 4 requires that animals live outdoors and be given access to shelter. It follows that Step 4 systems are required to use strains of animals which are suited to living outside; some customary strains of farm animals raised commercially under highly controlled indoor conditions may not thrive on extensive, outdoor farms.

Step 5 production not only builds on Step 4 by requiring the animals to live outdoors, but goes further by disallowing seasonal confinement and prohibiting all elective surgeries. This Step level has been extremely challenging for North American pig and cattle producers, particularly regarding the ban on castration. Pigs in North America are slaughtered at heavier weights than they are in Europe, therefore increasing the potential for boar taint. North American cattle producers are reluctant to leave bulls entire because of potential handling difficulties, increased sexual riding behaviour and subsequent reduced meat quality. As of 1 September 2011, five chicken farms have already been certified at the Step 5 level, each raising alternative breeds to commercial broilers.

As the 5-Step program was in its initial conceptualisation and development phase, it was thought that Step 5 would enable animals to experience a very good quality of life. However, as the multi-tiered standards were being written, GAP wished to challenge producers to go even further. Step 5+ was added to inspire farmers and ranchers to ascend even higher up the welfare ladder. Step 5+ disallows all live transport. Though early belief was that it would be extremely unlikely that any producer would be able to meet all the criteria to become certified to Step 5+ for many years to come, a pig and a turkey farm have already been certified at Step 5+ with several on the brink of achieving Step 5+ through the support of mobile and on-farm slaughter facilities.

The standards are, of course, much more complex than these short take-away descriptions and include stipulations for every aspect of on-farm/on-ranch production and transportation. The detailed welfare standards for meat chickens, pigs, beef cattle and turkeys are published (Global Animal Partnership 2011). Many standards are Step-differentiated, meaning there are specific thresholds (eg minimum age at weaning) for particular Step levels together with some other requirements (eg two-stage weaning is required from Step 4 upwards) (Haley *et al* 2002). Wherever possible, the standards use performance- or animal-based standards rather than engineering standards. For example, rather than requiring a specific linear measurement for feeder space, the 5-Step chicken standard states that birds "must be fed in a manner that enables all birds to eat their full ration". Of course, it is at times more practical to give an engineering standard, such as "light intensity in indoor housing during daylight hours must exceed 50 lux" for pigs and, in the new Turkey Standards, "ammonia levels must not exceed 15 ppm" for turkeys (Kristensen & Wathes 2000). And, as with any programme, there are comprehensive requirements for records and written policies and/or procedures.

Audits and certification

Unlike many welfare-labelling programme administrators, GAP elected not to conduct its own audits and compliance verification of farms and ranches, but rather to work with independent, third-party certification companies. In this way, as the standard-setter, GAP is best positioned to remain objective and maintain the integrity of the 5-Step program, which also benefits producers, retailers and consumers.

GAP does, however, train the auditors who are employed or contracted by the certification companies, since assessing the welfare of animals is unique, as is auditing to a multi-tiered standards programme.

Emphasis is placed on observing animal behaviour, inspecting the animals themselves and understanding the conditions under which they are living, with these responsibilities making up a significant portion of the on-site audit. Auditors are trained in sampling procedures and how to score animals for body condition, lameness and body lesions, among other indicators of welfare, including health.

The environment in which the animals are living is also audited critically. Such factors as temperature, light levels, air quality, the provision of food and water, general cleanliness and maintenance, and potential risks to the animals themselves are all inspected and recorded. Outdoor environments are also scrutinised, including the quality of the pasture or outdoor area, and whether or not there is sufficient shade, shelter and provisions to engage the animals in their natural rooting and foraging behaviour.

All farms and ranches, including all stages of production, are audited every 15 months. This certification cycle ensures that, over time, operations are seen during different seasons. Audits are also arranged so that the entire lifecycle of the animal is audited.

When an audit has been completed, the auditor sends a report to an authorised certification company and the audit report is reviewed. If the operation has met all of the relevant standards for a particular Step level, say Step 2, then a certificate is issued for Step 2. If one or more non-compliances have been reported, then the farm is sent a notification of the deficiency and required to submit evidence of corrective action, additional information, and/or a corrective action plan including a timeline that outlines how the non-compliance will be addressed. The submission is reviewed by the certifier, and if deemed acceptable, the certifier then issues a certificate. Re-audits may be required if one or more significant non-compliances are reported by the auditor, such as animal abuse or the use of farrowing crates.

The numbers of farms and ranches independently audited and certified to the 5-Step program are shown in Table 1. To date, more than 140 million animals are currently being raised annually according to the 5-Step Animal Welfare Rating Standards. With many farms and ranches now being audited for the second time, there is some evidence that the 5-Step program is encouraging producers to aim for a higher Step level. For example, forty-four chicken farms, four pig farms and two beef farms moved up a Step level when they were certified for the second time.

The importance of 5-Step's retail pilot partner

GAP piloted its 5-Step program in an exclusive, two-year partnership with Whole Foods Market (WFM), North America's largest natural foods grocer. The variety of farms and ranches supplying WFM provided a thorough testing ground for the programme, allowing GAP to gain

even better understanding of operational realities before expanding 5-Step, both in terms of retail partnership and geography. Chicken, pork, and beef products ranging from Step 1 to Step 5 are available regionally in WFM stores in the USA and Canada.

Despite extensive research on welfare measures and their validation on the farm (eg Widowski *et al* 2011), little work has reported on the implications of welfare programmes for retailers. Surveys on public opinion about farm animal welfare have been conducted (eg Lusk & Norwood 2008). The willingness of customers to pay for welfare-friendly products has also received some attention (eg Bennett *et al* 2002; McInerney 2004; Lagerkvist & Hess 2011). However, the implications for retailers are not clear. In spite of this uncertainty, and as part of the North American pilot partnership with GAP, Whole Foods Market determined that it would sell only Step-rated beef, pork, and chicken products, first in the fresh cases in all of its US then Canadian stores. In January 2010, WFM notified all its suppliers that, by the beginning of 2011, they would need to be certified to GAP's 5-Step program.

Given the hundreds of pork, beef and chicken producers supplying WFM's approximately 300 North American stores, and the relatively short time-frame by which to achieve 5-Step certification to ensure product availability, WFM created a GAP Implementation Team which was given the task of working with suppliers to solve challenges at the farm level, demonstrate chain of custody from farm to store, and execute the 5-Step program at the retail level.

One of the interesting findings of the WFM Implementation Team was how greatly farm-level challenges differed among species. In broad terms, these can be described as follows: for beef producers, issues revolved around cultural traditions and fear of engagement with members of the animal advocacy non-profit community; for pork producers, the main hurdles were management practices (eg teeth clipping, castration and tail docking) and record-keeping; chicken producers presented the fewest challenges, owing to the predominantly vertically integrated nature of the industry. To overcome these hurdles, WFM worked very closely with its suppliers, offering pre- and post-audit support programmes, which included a variety of preparation tools and resources, and providing support with the development of corrective action plans.

Execution of the retail component of GAP's 5-Step program involved a multifaceted approach, based on individual assessments of a supplier's situation and system. It is often thought that animal welfare programmes are implemented through a simple addition of X cents per pound; however, this is far too simplistic an approach due to the complex nature of today's retailing. Additional considerations at store level included clearing inventory of non-Step-rated product, training team members, creating a marketing campaign, and developing strategies to 'tell the story' to customers.

The North American launch of the 5-Step program, first in WFM's US stores, followed by its Canadian stores, garnered extensive media coverage that has resulted in heightened

consumer awareness of farm-animal welfare concerns and interest by producers and retailers around the world. The pilot partnership between non-profit standard-setter and for-profit retailer was critical to achieving this success.

Next steps

GAP remains committed to bringing together representatives from diverse sectors concerned about the welfare of farm animals and, principally through its signature initiative, promoting continuous improvement in agriculture.

Having completed its initial pilot phase with WFM, GAP is now negotiating with other retailers, both restaurants and grocers, as well as further-processors, in North America and beyond. Five-Step Animal Welfare Rating Standards are in development for additional species and revisions to the three original sets of standards are underway, each following a robust, multi-stakeholder consultative process.

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