

Tools and Resources for Alberta SPCA Peace Officers to Support Farmer Mental Health: A One Health Project

Project Report



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SUMMARY

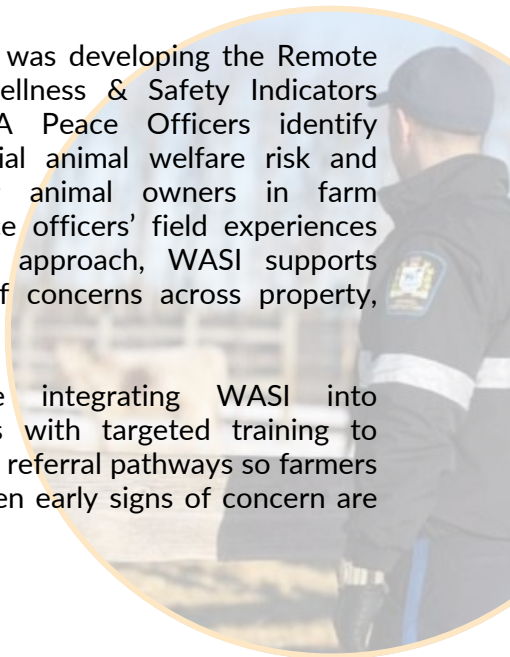
This report summarizes a research project between the Alberta SPCA and the University of Alberta on understanding how animal welfare concerns on farms are connected to the well-being of the people who care for animals.

The Alberta SPCA responds to concerns of animals in distress across Alberta, including on farms and rural properties. In some of these cases, peace officers observed that the animal owners appeared stressed or unwell – signs that can be connected to challenges in caring for animals.

We sought to examine how observations of the property, animals, and caretakers may signal emerging animal welfare risks during rural or farm-based investigations. The aim was to support earlier, effective, and compassionate responses that protect animals while recognizing the realities farmers face.

The major output of this project was developing the Remote Property Visit Observations: Wellness & Safety Indicators (WASI) to help Alberta SPCA Peace Officers identify observable indicators of potential animal welfare risk and underlying challenges affecting animal owners in farm environments. Informed by peace officers' field experiences and guided by a One Health approach, WASI supports consistent, early identification of concerns across property, animal, and human factors.

Key recommendations include integrating WASI into investigations, providing officers with targeted training to support its use, and strengthening referral pathways so farmers can be connected to support when early signs of concern are identified.



INTRODUCTION

The Issue

Despite animal protection laws, cases of poor welfare still occur across Canada. Most of these cases do not involve intentional harm. Instead, they are often linked to chronic neglect, such as inadequate housing, poor hygiene, underfed animals, or untreated injuries.¹

At the same time, farming is one of the most demanding and isolating occupations. Farmers face financial uncertainty, long hours, physical hazards, extreme weather conditions, and emotional strain.²⁻⁴ When stress builds and support is limited, it can become harder to maintain routines, manage workloads, and respond quickly to animal health needs.

An aging farm population adds another layer of complexity,⁵ as physical capacity, cognitive health, and energy levels may decline over time. Together, these pressures can increase the risk that both people and animals experience harm.



What We Knew Before This Project

Previous research has shown that farmer well-being and animal welfare are closely connected.⁶ Farmers themselves often describe animal care and personal well-being as inseparable.⁷⁻⁸ Studies have found that higher stress, depression, isolation, and financial strain are associated with poorer animal outcomes, including lameness, illness, and inadequate nutrition.⁹⁻¹⁰ Long-term reviews of animal welfare investigations have also shown that cases of neglect frequently occur alongside major life stressors, such as illness, relationship breakdown, or mental health challenges.¹¹

At the same time, existing animal welfare assessment tools focus mainly on animals and infrastructure. Some tools include basic human factors, such as staffing levels or training, but they do not address stress, exhaustion, declining capacity, or emotional strain.¹²⁻¹³ Surveillance systems that rely on records or reports also miss early warning signs, especially on small or diverse farming operations.¹⁴ As a result, there has been no practical way to systematically consider human, animal, and property indicators together when assessing risk.



Why This Work Matters

Animal welfare does not exist in isolation from human well-being.^{1,6} When farmers are overwhelmed, unwell, or unsupported, animals are at greater risk, even when care and responsibility are deeply valued.²⁻⁴ Enforcement responses that focus only on animals, without recognizing human distress, can miss opportunities for early intervention and support.

Alberta SPCA Peace Officers may be the first professionals to see signs that something is wrong on a farm. They observe animals, buildings, equipment, and the people living and working there. However, officers have shared that they receive little guidance on how to recognize signs of human distress or declining capacity, or how to factor those observations into their decision-making. Without this guidance, opportunities to mitigate harm and connect people to resources earlier may be lost.



Goals of the Project

Guided by a One Health approach,¹⁵ which recognizes the interconnected well-being of people, animals, and the environment, the study had three main goals.

1. Identify observable indicators across three domains: the condition of animals*, the state of the property, and the behaviour or circumstances of the individual.
2. Understand how these indicators tend to co-occur in farm investigations involving welfare concerns.
3. Develop a practical, field-based assessment tool that could support Alberta SPCA Peace Officers in identifying emerging risk earlier and responding in ways that protect animal welfare while acknowledging human distress.

By integrating a range of human and environmental factors into an animal welfare assessment tool, this project takes an important step toward more proactive, effective, and compassionate approaches to farm investigations.



* Because the Alberta SPCA Peace Officers already have resources to document animal condition, our focus for this project was on the people and property conditions.

METHODS

How the Study was Conducted

This project was designed to learn directly from the experiences of the officers who respond to animal welfare concerns. The goal was to understand what officers see in the field, identify patterns across cases, and use that knowledge to develop a practical tool that supports early and effective intervention.

At A Glance:

How the Study Was Done

- **Who participated:** 18 officers with experience investigating animal welfare concerns.
- **What we did:** Conducted focus groups and interviews to learn what officers observe in the field.
- **What we asked:** How animal, property, and human signs tend to appear together during investigations.
- **How data were used:** Identified common, observable indicators linked to emerging welfare risk.
- **What it produced:** A practical tool to support early identification, decision-making, and next steps.

Who Took Part

We collected data from 18 officers working in Alberta who had direct experience investigating animal welfare concerns in rural and farming settings. Participants included officers from the Alberta SPCA and municipal Community Peace Officers working in a rural county.

Officers ranged from early-career to highly experienced, with time in the role spanning from a few months to over 15 years. This mix allowed us to capture both fresh perspectives and long-term field experience.

To protect privacy, no identifying information about individuals or specific locations is included in this report.



How Information was Collected

Data were collected between February and September 2025. Officers were invited to participate voluntarily and independently of their employers.

Most participants took part in a focus group, which lasted about one hour. A small number of officers who could not attend a focus group participated in individual interviews lasting about 45-60 minutes. Some sessions were held in person or virtually.

During these conversations, officers were asked about:

- What they observe on farms where animal welfare concerns are present.
- Situations where animal concerns appeared alongside signs of farmer stress or declining capacity.
- How interactions with farmers unfold during investigations.
- What supports or tools would be helpful in their role.

All conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed so they could be carefully reviewed.



How Information was Analyzed

The research team reviewed the transcripts to identify recurring patterns, common observations, and shared experiences across officers. The focus remained on what officers could directly see or notice in the field, rather than assumptions, interpretations, or diagnoses.

The analysis looked for connections across three areas:

The condition of animals

The condition of the property

The appearance and behaviour of the owner

Members of the research team reviewed the data to ensure the findings were accurate and reflected officers' perspectives. The results were also shared with several officers and agency experts to ensure the findings aligned with their field experiences and that we were not overlooking something important.



How the Tool was Developed

Findings from the analysis were used to draft a tool of observable indicators. The indicators were written in plain, non-judgmental language and focused only on what could be seen during an investigation.

The tool was organized into three sections: property, animals, and the individual. We later removed the animal section because the officers already have a process for assessing animal welfare. The tool included a simple summary score system to reflect increasing levels of concern, from low to critical. Each level was linked to suggested actions, such as monitoring as usual, providing resources, or referrals.

The draft tool was reviewed and refined using feedback from several officers, agency experts, farmers, and mental health professionals with agricultural experience. This step helped ensure the tool was practical, respectful, and appropriate for use in real farm settings.

Ethics and Oversight

The study was reviewed and approved by the University of Alberta's research ethics board. All participants provided informed consent, and participation was voluntary.

MAJOR FINDINGS

What Officers Observed on Farms

The officers described consistent patterns across investigations where animal welfare concerns were present. These patterns reflected not only animal care issues, but also changes in property conditions and signs that animal owners were struggling or losing capacity. Six major themes emerged from the analysis. Each theme is described in the following pages.

At A Glance:

The Six Major Themes

1. **Property and Grounds Disrepair**
2. **Compromised Living Conditions**
3. **Animal Neglect**
4. **Farmer Distress**
 - Physical appearance and self-care
 - Substance use concerns
 - Emotional distress
 - Disorganized thinking or confusion
 - Defensiveness or hostility
 - Lack of social support and isolation
5. **Livestock Management Challenges**
6. **Overaccumulation of Animals and Objects**

1. Property and Grounds Disrepair

Officers often described properties that were visibly deteriorated compared to the surrounding properties. For example, buildings, fencing, gates, and yards showed damage, neglect, or were beyond normal wear and tear.

Overgrown vegetation, broken equipment, garbage and debris, and collapsing structures were also common. Officers viewed the condition of the property as an important signal of declining capacity and difficulty keeping up with daily demands.

“The entire property, like the corrals, are dilapidated. Front gates are usually in poor condition. The house itself is run down and in very poor condition.”

(Focus Group 1)



2. Compromised Living Conditions

Inside homes and living spaces, officers sometimes observed conditions that posed risks to both people and the animals. These included lack of electricity or clean water, extreme clutter, and limited space to move around safely.

In some cases, animals were housed inside living areas. Officers noted that these arrangements were often motivated by the owner's concern for animals, but created unsafe and unhealthy environments.

"You walk in and can't move without stepping over something... that's usually when we know the person might be struggling."

(Focus Group 1)



3. Farmer Distress

Key Sub-Themes Officers Observed

Officers described several ways that distress or declining capacity tended to show up during farm investigations. It is important to reinforce that these signs were never viewed in isolation. The theme of farmer distress was extensive, so we divided it into six sub-themes. Each of these are briefly described below.

a) Physical appearance and self-care

Officers noted changes in hygiene, clothing, and overall presentation that suggested reduced self-care. While farming work is physically demanding and work clothes get dirty, concern arose when officers noted that their appearance had changed or deteriorated over time, especially for farmers officers knew from previous encounters.

b) Substance use concerns

In some cases, officers observed signs that raised concern about alcohol or substance use, such as empty containers, strong odours, or even disclosures by the animal owner.

c) Emotional distress

Many animal owners showed strong emotional reactions during investigations, including tearfulness, anxiety, fear, anger, or emotional exhaustion. Officers often learned that these reactions were connected to major life stressors, such as illness, grief, trauma, or financial pressure.

Key Sub-Themes Officers Observed

d) Disorganized thinking or confusion

Officers described interactions where animal owners seemed confused, distracted, or unable to follow conversations or instructions. Communication was sometimes fragmented or unfocused, which raised concerns about their ability to process information and follow instructions related to animal care.

e) Defensiveness or hostility

Some animal owners responded to welfare concerns with defensiveness or hostility. With additional communication, to avoid escalation, officers came to understand these reactions were usually driven by anxiety about enforcement action or losing animals.

f) Lack of social support and isolation

Many animal owners lived alone, and appeared to be socially isolated from family and neighbors, and lived far from other support networks. Officers frequently encountered older individuals with limited help due to mobility issues, health concerns, or the loss of a partner. Many were reluctant to seek or accept help.

4. Animal Neglect

Across investigations, officers described animals whose basic needs were not being met. Common concerns included underfeeding, lack of clean water or shelter, untreated injuries, and animals in poor body condition. In more severe cases, dead animals or remains were found on the property. Officers noted that many owners believed they were doing their best, even when care had clearly declined.

“Almost one to three animals of every animal group had minor injuries, not enough feed, not enough shelter... and they truly believed they weren’t doing anything wrong.”

(Focus Group 2)



5. Livestock Management Challenges

Officers observed management practices that increased risk for animals and people, and it appeared that these practices were usually shaped by time pressure, aging, financial strain, or seasonal demands. For example, these practices included overcrowding corrals, delayed transport to auction, mixing species in fields, and calving at the same time as planting. Officers noted that stress and competing demands often drove these decisions.

“They’re calving, but they also have to plant the field. That’s when everything starts to pile up.”

(Focus Group 2)



6. Overaccumulation

Officers frequently observed situations where accumulation had reached a level that created safety, health, and welfare concerns. Accumulation rarely involved a single issue. Instead, excessive numbers of animals and large amounts of stored objects often occurred together and developed gradually over time.

Overaccumulation occurred in two contexts:

more animals on the property than can be adequately cared for

excessive accumulation of materials, equipment, or objects

The following pages explain each of these in more detail.



Overaccumulation of Animals

Officers described cases where animal owners kept more animals than they were able to care for properly. This included livestock, horses, and companion animals such as dogs and cats. In many situations, animal numbers continued to grow without the owners having a clear plan for breeding control, sale, rehoming, or use. As a result, overcrowding, limited feed, delayed veterinary care, and declining animal condition became common outcomes.

Officers noted that the individuals in these cases seemed to have strong emotional attachment to their animals. Many owners felt a deep sense of responsibility and believed they were the only ones who could protect their animals, even as their own capacity declined. Interestingly, accumulation involving livestock was often normalized within agricultural contexts, and this made it less likely for others to recognize a problem until welfare concerns became severe.

“You might see 75 dogs on a property”

“It’s older animals, herds of horses that are starting to get up there in years. They’re not used for anything anymore, but they’re just holding on to them”

(Focus Group 1)



Overaccumulation of Objects

Officers also described extensive accumulation of equipment, machinery, household items, and debris on farm properties. This accumulation often created unsafe and unsanitary living and working conditions, and significantly reduced the space to move around safely inside homes and barns. Large numbers of broken or unused machines, tools, and materials were commonly observed outdoors.

According to officers with extensive experience in these cases, object accumulation was described as something that developed slowly and was closely linked to social isolation and declining capacity. As conditions worsened, farmers often withdrew from others, limited access to their homes or properties, and became increasingly isolated. Officers noted that the extent and severity of accumulation often provided insight into how long the situation had been developing.

“The longer the hoarding has been going on, the less access there is in the house... that’s where you start to see how long this has been building.”

(Interview 3)



TOOL DEVELOPMENT

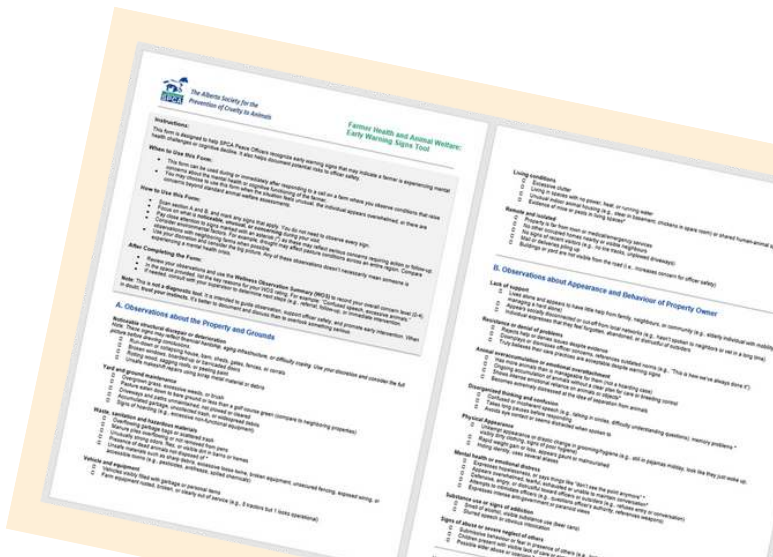
From Research to Action

These themes were used to develop a tool based on observable, non-judgmental indicators that are grounded in the field experiences of officers. Indicators were organized into two major domains*:

- property and grounds
- human factors

The final tool includes 50 indicators and is designed to support officers in identifying emerging risk, guiding conversations, and determining appropriate next steps. Officers already have another process for assessing animal welfare, so those indicators are not duplicated here.

Together, the findings show that animal welfare concerns on farms are rarely isolated issues. They are often part of a broader pattern involving people, animals, and place, underscoring the importance of early, holistic, and supportive responses.



IMPLICATIONS

For Animal Welfare Practice

The findings reinforce that there is no single cause of animal welfare concerns on farms. Animal care is shaped in part by the owner's physical health, mental well-being, support network, and capacity, as well as the condition of the property. Assessments that focus only on animals may miss important warning signs and reduce opportunities for an earlier intervention.

For Peace Officers

Because farmers can be located in rural and remote locations, officers may be among the first to encounter those who are struggling. Their role frequently extends beyond enforcement into crisis response, communication, and problem-solving. Tools and training that acknowledge this context can support officers in their decision making, and help ensure safer interactions, reduce escalation, and improve outcomes for both animals and people.

For Animal Owners and Rural Communities

The findings highlight that supporting farmer well-being is not separate from protecting the welfare of animals. When animal owners have access to support, resources, and timely intervention, animals can benefit too. Addressing isolation, aging, and mental health challenges is a shared responsibility across agricultural, enforcement, and community services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What This Study Tells Us

1. Adopt integrated assessment approaches

Animal welfare assessments should incorporate observable indicators related to property conditions and human factors. This supports earlier identification of risk and provides a more complete understanding of situations.

2. Use early warning tools to guide response

Practical tools grounded in field observations can help officers identify emerging concerns, document patterns, and determine appropriate steps before a situation worsens.

3. Strengthen training and support for officers

Training should include mental health literacy, communication strategies for engaging farmers, and guidance for recognizing hoarding-related behaviour. This training can also reduce stress and risk for the officers.

4. Promote cross-sector collaboration

Effective responses require coordination across animal welfare, agriculture, veterinary services, and social services. Further work should examine referral pathways to improve outcomes and reduce repeat incidents.



CONCLUSIONS

Together, these findings highlight the value of integrated approaches to supporting animal welfare. Supporting animal owners' well-being is not separate from supporting animals. The findings from our project reinforce that animal owners who are stressed, isolated, or have capacity issues can negatively impact the welfare of animals in their care. Using an assessment tool that includes human and environmental factors is one way to help ensure healthier farms, safer investigations, and better outcomes for animals in rural areas.

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**WE APPRECIATE THE GENEROSITY OF THOSE WHO
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CONTACT

Melissa Logan, MSc.

Alberta SPCA

Edmonton, AB

(780) 732-3749

mlogan@albertaspca.org

AlbertaSPCA.org

Rebecca Purc-Stephenson, PhD

University of Alberta

Camrose, AB

(780) 281-0158

purcstep@ualberta.ca

agwellab.ca

