

Winnipeg — From Friday's Globe and Mail Last updated on Friday, Jul. 10, 2009 02:51AM EDT

Lambs to the slaughter

Barn blazes turn up heat on building codes



Firefighters work to control a hog farm fire at the Netley Hutterite colony north of Winnipeg last year. Scenes of dying animals have become disturbingly common for firefighters in Manitoba, where regulations fail to reflect modern farms

By the time fire chief John Schroeder arrived on the scene, the barn was fully engulfed and more than 25,000 chickens lay dead inside.

Most succumbed to smoke before flame early Tuesday morning, so Mr. Schroeder didn't have to hear them die. But even without a head full of animal screams – a haunting noise that has sent many rural Manitoba firefighters into counselling – the veteran chief found it a difficult scene.

“It was devastation,” said Mr. Schroeder, chief for the town of Kleefeld, 60 kilometres south of Winnipeg. “There was no life left when we got there. No chance of saving anything.”

Such scenes of mass immolation have become disturbingly common for fire departments in farming communities. While livestock structures have evolved greatly since the 1970s – with computer automation giving way to 120,000 square-foot barns holding upward of 150,000 animals – the building code for them has not.

Last year, more than 31,000 animals perished in barn fires – eight times the number that died the year before, according to statistics kept by the Office of the Fire Commissioner. This year's tally is pacing toward a record with more than 30,900 animals already dead.

Animal-rights groups have long said the province needs to stiffen rules on farm buildings. Now, the fire commissioner apparently agrees, inviting comments on a discussion paper regarding farm building codes for the past two months.

“We'd noticed a large number of losses over the last 10 years,” said deputy fire commissioner Chris Jones. “A number of these incidences are occurring due to lack of maintenance, overloading of circuits and faulty mechanical systems.”

While rights groups applaud the move toward regulating farm buildings, they worry new regulations may still disregard the value of animal life.

“It seems that the new code will be based on human occupancy, rather than animal occupancy,” said Liz White, director of Animal Alliance Canada, who has sent a number of suggestions to the commissioner. “We are not asking for the same fire codes that apply to public or private buildings, but I don't know anyone who thinks it's okay for thousands of animals to burn alive. There is an animal-welfare component that farmers should have to take into account here.”

Ms. White wants a new code to mandate the installation of sprinklers, fire walls, smoke alarms and fire-retardant surfaces – all monitored by mandatory inspections.

The organization may soon appeal for international intervention, claiming that Canadian regulations surrounding the treatment of animals constitutes an unfair trade advantage.

“We have a very good argument that may bring about trade embargoes,” Ms. White said.

The hog industry, already reeling from swine flu and high feed prices, says any increased cost could be too dear.

“Some of these recommendations would be far too expensive and are not going to work anyway,” said Ian Wishart, a farmer and president of the Keystone Agricultural Producers, a farm lobby group. “With the sprinklers, many areas don't even have the water to make sprinklers effective.”

The commissioner's discussion paper calculates that a new code would raise construction costs by 2 to 4 per cent.

“We've had hundreds of responses to the paper, which is good,” Mr. Jones said. “It's generating a lively discussion.”