

2010 RECIPIENT IETS DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD



Many people will not know Irma Robertson, but she is a most worthy recipient of the IETS Distinguished Service Award. Irma works quietly but tirelessly behind the scenes, tending to her duties and making sure that all things come together and work. Irma retired as chair of the Forms and Certification Subcommittee of HASAC in 2008, but she continued to work on Chapter 9 of the new edition of the IETS Manual (Certification and Identification of Embryos) until it went to press in 2009. This is the way Irma works: quietly but diligently, without fanfare, and until now, without recognition.

Irma Robertson is currently executive director of quality assurance at the Holstein Association USA. She ushered into the Holstein Herd Book the first Holstein calves arising from embryo transfer technology in 1974. At that time, the ET suffix had not yet been established. She also administered the Undesirable Recessive Program going back to the time when Red Factor was considered undesirable, and now, the testing for recessives using DNA technology. Although the earliest stimulus to embryo transfer in North America came from the beef industry, use in the dairy industry mushroomed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This increased the need for blood typing (and now genotyping), which she administered, providing immediate interpretation for parentage verification and facilitation of semen mixing, when the need arose.

After working with paper files and a variety of recipient identification reports, she welcomed the opportunity to work with Dick Nelson, who had been asked at the IETS meeting in 1984 to work on embryo record and identification systems. Practitioners were finding it difficult to deal with different record requirements for different breeds, and it seemed necessary to arrive at a consensus for a standardized requirement.

After 2 years of building consensus among practitioners, government regulatory agencies, scientists, and breed organizations, the Board of Governors of the IETS approved, in January 1986, the record systems that we now take for granted. Although IETS could only recommend a standardized record system, Irma was in a position with the Holstein breed to enforce its use, and in April of that year she implemented IETS standards, just as the freezing of embryos was beginning to become widespread.

Irma depended on scientists and practitioners on the Forms and Certification Sub-Committee, which she chaired from 1997 until January 2008. She also sought information from scientists and practitioners outside of the sub-committee when adjusting or creating records to accommodate emerging technologies such as in vitro fertilization, cloning, and transgenics, often depending on persons especially well positioned to help, such as Dr. Harpreet Kochhar of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, who outlined record systems to accommodate transgenic embryos in keeping with the established pattern.

With each step from recovery and transfer of fresh and frozen embryos, direct transfer, oocyte recovery, IVM/IVF, cloning, and transgenics, there was a need for ongoing adjustments, additions and revisions to the record system, and creation of new forms and straw label recommendations. With each step, there was continued seeking of advice, which Irma tirelessly pursued. At the time of registering clones resulting from nuclear transfer, her counsel was sought by other breed organizations in the United States and Europe.

In 1996, with the cooperation of USDA/APHIS and USDA/FAS, Irma was able to obtain a commitment from the Standing Veterinary Committee of the European Union, through its chairman, that the IETS record system would continue to be accepted in EU countries rather than requiring compliance with the proposed European Community decision for Pedigree and Zootechnical Certificates for the importation of embryos. This was a major achievement for the IETS, and yet few of us were even aware of it.

In Paris in February 2004, Irma met Dr. Michel Thibier, chairman of the IETS HASAC Committee and Liaison to the OIE, and Alain Malefosse, then chairman of the International Committee for Animal Recording (ICAR) working group on artificial insemination and other relevant technologies, where it was agreed that ICAR would adopt and reference the IETS record system as the world standard.

Irma is the primary author of Chapter 9 in the new IETS Manual, but she also co-authored (with Dick Nelson, now retired from Holstein Association) the chapter on Certification and Identification of the Embryo in previous IETS Manuals. She was a member of the Board of Trustees of the IETS Foundation, serving as treasurer from January 1995 until 2001, and she has attended most annual meetings of the IETS since 1989, including sub-committee meetings to address forms and certification.

Irma lives in Hinsdale, New Hampshire, with her husband, Stanley. She has three grown daughters and 12 grandchildren. Please join us in congratulating Irma Robertson, recipient of the 2010 IETS Distinguished Service Award; we appreciate her time and commitment to IETS goals and objectives and her tireless service to the embryo transfer industry.