

FAWC publishes Opinion on the welfare of UK dairy cows

Dairy cow welfare has received increasing coverage and the most recent report to be published in this area is an 'Opinion on the welfare of the dairy cow' by the UK's Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC). FAWC periodically issues Opinions with the aim of advising government bodies within the United Kingdom on subjects that they believe to be of particular importance to farm animal welfare.

The FAWC last considered dairy cow welfare in 1997 when it published a report in which 191 recommendations were made on a wide range of aspects, including: stockmanship, building design, calving aids, mutilations, unwanted progeny, zero-grazing, rearing heifers and calves, nutrition and cow health. The recent opinion is much more specific in its focus and FAWC identifies six areas of critical importance:

- The supply of trained, skilled dairy farmers and stockmen;
- The incidence, prevalence and causes of lameness, mastitis, metabolic diseases and injuries in dairy cows;
- The level of infertility in both heifers and cows, though this is not itself a direct measure of welfare;
- The lack of centralised recording schemes yielding data at the national level;
- Breeding policies for dairy cattle; and
- Public surveillance of welfare.

The FAWC Opinion is sympathetic to the difficulties faced by the dairy industry over the past ten years (input costs have risen and milk prices have decreased, often below the cost of production) and they remark that these difficulties have, in turn, resulted in less investment in areas such as education, recruitment and training, and farm infrastructure; all of which can have effects on dairy cow welfare. The FAWC also recognises the efforts made by the industry to improve dairy cow welfare following their 1997 report, including the introduction of breeding initiatives that consider health and welfare and reducing many traditional causes of lameness, eg sole ulcers. However, the general feeling of the Opinion is that more needs to be done to improve the welfare of dairy cows and areas that were of concern ten years ago are still of concern today: overall prevalence of lameness and mastitis have remained unchanged or have increased, and conception rates have been decreasing year-on-year and now stand at only 40%. Additionally, the FAWC note that there is a problem with the recruitment and retention of dairy staff in the UK and that there are currently a number of barriers to training initiatives in the industry, including a low perceived value and lack of awareness of the benefits of training. The UK is also one of the few countries within the European Union that does not have a centralised national database for recording dairy cow health and welfare, which the FAWC believe compromises the ability of the UK dairy industry to make national improvements in welfare.

In conclusion, the FAWC consider that "the evidence is that the welfare of dairy cows has not improved significantly

over the last decade" and five recommendations are made to ensure that today's dairy cow has "a life worth living".

FAWC Opinion on the Welfare of the Dairy Cow (October 2009). Farm Animal Welfare Council. A4, 14 pp Available for download from the FAWC website: <http://www.fawc.org.uk/reports.htm> or by contacting the FAWC Secretariat, Area 5A, 9 Millbank, c/o Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London, SW1P 3JR

E Carter

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Welfare Quality® publishes pig, poultry and cattle assessment protocols

2004 saw the official start of 'Welfare Quality®', a project described as the largest piece of integrated research to be carried out on animal welfare within Europe. The project, supported by the European Commission under the Sixth Framework Programme: Food Quality and Safety, has been co-ordinated by Professor Harry Blokhuis of Wageningen University and Research Centre, and involved over 40 partner institutes and universities. The primary aim of Welfare Quality® has been to develop a scientifically-based method for assessing and improving farm animal welfare across Europe through integrating animal welfare into the food quality chain. Four main areas of research were identified as key issues for investigation at the start of the project:

- Consumers, retailers and producers concerns and requirements for animal welfare and welfare-friendly products;
- To develop a robust on-farm welfare monitoring and information systems for selected farm animal species;
- To define integrated, knowledge-based, practicable species-specific strategies to improve farm animal welfare; and
- To implement a welfare monitoring and information system and welfare improvement strategies developed.

In October 2009, the final stakeholder conference: 'Delivering Animal Welfare and Quality: Transparency in the Food Production Chain', was held in Uppsala, Sweden. The conference was used to summarise the progress made during the five-year project and also to launch the Welfare Quality® assessment protocols for pigs, poultry and cattle. Pigs, poultry and cattle had been selected as the three species to focus on when developing a standardised assessment method due to their economic and numeric importance.

These assessment protocols each follow the same format and contain: a background of the Welfare Quality® project; guidelines describing the type and method of data to be collected when assessing an animal unit (defined as a section of a farm, a transport unit or a slaughter plant that deals with a certain type of animal); scoring sheets and how to calculate scores once measurements have been taken; and general guidelines for use when visiting an animal unit.

Each protocol is based around four welfare principles considered to be key to high standards of animal welfare: good feeding, good housing, good health and appropriate behaviour. A total score is calculated for each principle by considering