

REPORTS AND COMMENTS

Animal welfare implications of farm assurance schemes

In July 1999, the UK's Farm Animal Welfare Council was asked by Ministers to consider the implications of farm assurance schemes for livestock welfare. These schemes have the potential to ensure that standards do not drop below those set by law and, indeed, to help raise them above this level. Although under World Trade Organisation free-trade agreements the importation of products from animals reared under poor standards of welfare cannot be banned on these grounds, the labelling of products from livestock kept to high welfare standards enables the consumer to influence and promote high standards through their choice of what to buy. In its review, FAWC wished to address a number of issues. Although farm assurance schemes have the potential to raise livestock welfare standards, the extent to which this is happening is unclear. Nor is it clear how well informed the consumer is about the various assurance schemes currently operating in the UK and their significance to livestock welfare.

In view of the complexity of the wide range of issues involved, FAWC has decided to produce an interim report. This summarises the Council's findings and recommendations to date, and its purpose is also to stimulate comment on the key issues raised. Following the introductory chapters that outline the legislative background and the general principles of farm assurance schemes, the report addresses the current status of implementation of the major schemes in the UK, attitudes to the schemes amongst consumers, retailers, farmers and other sectors, and the assessment and evaluation of welfare standards. It also provides a summary of the main issues emerging from the study to date.

FAWC draws attention to the difficulties of on-farm welfare assessment and points out that, because of these difficulties, standards in assurance schemes tend to be qualitative, subjective and imprecise. It is noted that the development of practical and reliable measures for use on farms is at an early stage and that "time is required for current research on this subject to be completed". However, FAWC believes that even where standards in codes are minimal, they have already served a useful purpose in helping to spread awareness of animal welfare.

The report includes ten specific recommendations. The first is that the scope of information collected during inspections by the State Veterinary Service should be expanded to include evidence that will enable the impact of assurance schemes to be assessed through comparisons of welfare standards on assured versus non-assured farms. The second recommendation is that the Government should consider ways of directing agricultural policy to encourage greater participation in assurance schemes. Third, FAWC recommends that there be full and open dialogue between research groups and technical managers responsible for scheme standards, to ensure that standards are based upon science and experience rather than perceptions. Other recommendations include: that more research be directed to developing animal welfare indices on farms; that consideration be given to including standards that relate to the breeding and rearing of animals for specific production systems; and that scheme owners cooperate to establish an independent expert group to inform deliberations on the animal welfare component of all farm assurance standards.

Considerable hope has been pinned on farm assurance schemes as a means of improving livestock welfare standards. This is a timely and important review of the present state of developments and a valuable pointer to some of the difficulties that remain to be overcome.

Interim Report on the Animal Welfare Implications of Farm Animal Assurance Schemes (August 2001) Farm Animal Welfare Council. 45 pp. A4 paperback. Published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, PB 5797. Available from FAWC Secretariat, DEFRA, 1a Page Street, London SW1P 4PQ and also at <http://www.fawc.org.uk>.