

Self-evaluation of animal welfare by the farmer: a report of application on Austrian cattle farms

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Abstract

It is not sufficient to merely publish regulations and strictly control them to improve the living conditions of farm animals. The farmer must receive precise information, understand the individual measures and be able to act with personal responsibility. A new animal welfare law has been in force in Austria since the 1st of January 2005. A system of self-evaluation is being developed for putting these new legal requirements into practice. The aim of this self-evaluation system is to enable every farmer to personally check his animal housing system against the given standards. This independent work motivates the farmer and makes him aware of animal welfare issues. This new strategy for the implementation of animal welfare law was originally developed, tested and found to be successful by the Federal Administration of the Austrian Province of Vorarlberg. Self-evaluation is to be carried out by means of specific checklists and manuals. Checklists and manuals are currently being drawn up for cattle, pigs, poultry, sheep and goats. The checklists and manuals will include all of the requirements of Austrian animal welfare legislation and will be formulated in easily understandable questions with 'yes' or 'no' answers. The manuals will describe the methods for assessing legal requirements on the farm as well as the conditions for compliance with legislation, and give advice on how to improve the state of animal welfare on the farm. This paper gives an example of the self-evaluation system for cattle farming.

Keywords: animal welfare, assessment system, cattle, legislation, on-farm checklist, self-evaluation

Introduction

An improved information flow is integral to a community-wide understanding of farming systems and farm animal welfare issues. It is utterly essential to stimulate a dialogue between science, authorities and farmers, and to place information about housing systems, conducive to animal welfare, where it is needed.

A new animal welfare law has been in force since the 1st of January 2005 in Austria. The great challenge now is to make the information contained in this extensive legal work available to the farmer. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that all concerned – farmer, advisor and executive authority – have a uniform understanding of the facts. To sum up, it can be said that a concept is necessary to achieve the following main objectives:

- To make animal welfare law easily understandable to every farmer.
- The standardisation and interpretation of animal welfare law.
- To enable farmers to be directly responsible.

- To motivate farmers and make them aware of animal welfare issues.

- To form a basis of dialogue between farmers and the veterinarian who attends to the farm (herd health service).

Thus, a strategy of self-evaluation on the farm was adopted that was originally established by the Federal Administration of the Austrian Province of Vorarlberg. An assessment system of milk hygiene at farm level (Von der Emde *et al* 1998) served as a model for development in Vorarlberg. The new EC Food and Feed Law, containing the principles of change to personal responsibility, longitudinal approach (from stable to table), improved 'traceability', risk-analyses, legitimisation and registration, precautionary principle, etc gave additional support to the undertaking of this work. This system proved to be successful in Vorarlberg and should now be further developed, expanded and implemented throughout Austria in respect of the requirements of the new animal welfare law.

Materials and methods

Self-evaluation is carried out by means of specific checklists and manuals. Checklists and manuals for cattle, sheep

Table 1 An example from the self-evaluation manual for cattle farming.

A Flooring is not slippery	
Legal basis	1. ThVO, Annex 2, 2.1.1. Flooring must not be slippery [...].
Method of assessment	Slip resistance of all floors used by the animal (lying area, passages, exercise yard,) is checked. · Observing animal behaviour: observe the way in which animals walk and whether they slip, especially when standing up and lying down, self-licking, walking with a lowered head, etc. · 'Wellington boot test': an experienced assessor should be able to judge slipperiness by turning and pushing the rubber heel of a Wellington boot on the floor using his or her bodyweight.
Legal requirements will be fulfilled if no method of assessment indicates a slippery floor surface that increases the danger of slipping and injury to the animal.
Recommendation	Slipperiness may vary greatly among different floor types, such as very slippery worn-down concrete areas on the one hand, and non-slip rubber matting or mastic asphalt floors or deep litter on rough concrete, on the other. Floor areas with the greatest slipping potential, eg areas under hooves in the cubicles or stalls should be given particular attention in the assessment. In addition to floor material, the surface profile is also important.
Importance	It is essential for the flooring to afford sufficient grip to prevent the animals from slipping or falling or stepping on teats. Good grip also facilitates normal rising and lying down movements.
Realisation	If slats must be exchanged, this can be called a 'structural measure' for which there exists a transition period for fulfilment to 2012 or 2020, respectively. Management measures must be realised immediately.

and goats are currently being drawn up at the HBLFA Raumberg-Gumpenstein Agricultural Research & Education Centre, and for pigs and poultry at the Vienna University of Veterinary Medicine. The project is carried out by order of the Austrian Ministry of Health and Women in working groups consisting of representatives of ministries (Ministry of Health and Women and Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management), scientific institutions, authorities, advisory boards, breeding organisations, the animal health service and individual experts in animal husbandry and animal welfare. This paper describes, as an example, the self-evaluation system for cattle farming (Ofner & Schröck 2006a,b).

Results and discussion

The checklists and manuals include all of the requirements of Austrian animal welfare legislation. Nevertheless, the text of the law is given in easily understandable questions for direct implementation on the farm. The farmer personally checks his animal housing system against the given standards. Changes are planned in respect of welfare, and improvements to the housing system are carried out. In the case of external control by authorities, the farmer can be sure that he has done his best to avoid welfare problems on the farm.

Checklists

The checklists cover all legal requirements and are formulated in easily understandable questions with 'yes' and 'no' answers. Each question is supplemented by a brief explanation (footnote) or a diagram to further and improve understanding. For a better overview, the checklist is divided into sections marked by capital letters, and every question within the section is numbered. The current draft consists of about 80 questions divided into the following sections: A) type and condition of flooring, B) possibility of movement and social interaction, C) air, light and noise, D) feeding and

drinking, E) stockmanship and F) operations (eg dehorning, castration, etc).

By means of a single checklist it is possible to assess all of the cattle on a farm because there are separate columns for dairy cows, suckling cows, calves, young cattle, beef cattle and breeding bulls containing the respective requirements. This facilitates handling for the farmer.

Manuals

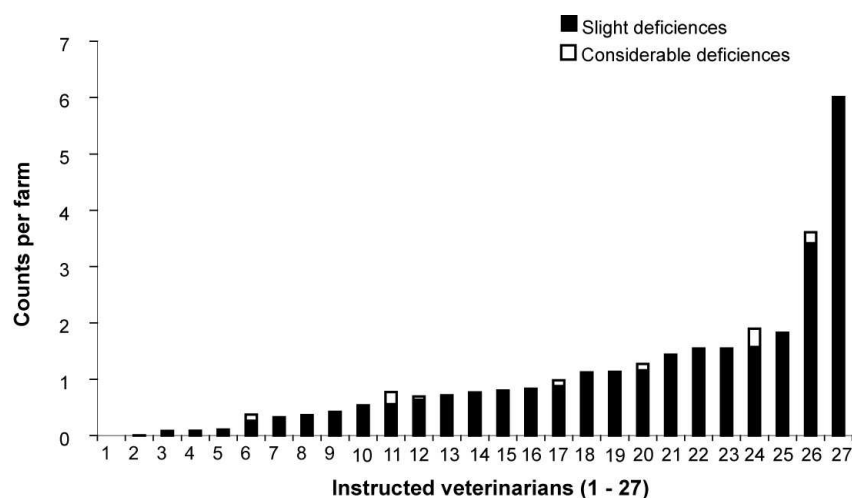
The manuals describe the methods to assess the legal requirements on a farm, the conditions for compliance with legislation, and give advice on how to improve the state of animal welfare on the farm. They also give some background information on the questions used in the checklist, and explain why individual requirements are important for the animal. At the end of each paragraph, tips are given for the realisation of the requirements in practice. Table 1 shows one part of the manual as an example.

Initial experience of practical use

A similar system has already been used for five years in the Austrian Province of Vorarlberg. The checklist was sent to every farmer (over 2,900) with an individual letter containing information and an explanation of the political motivation by the most important agricultural representatives. Moreover, a great deal of information was given verbatim in the agricultural press and several public discussions were organised. Within two or three weeks, 27 instructed veterinarians were sent out to make a plausibility check of self-evaluation by farmers. It was helpful to have the opportunity to combine the welfare check with an epidemiological control programme. There was an attempt to check the entire list in the first year, and, in the following years, attention was given to changing critical points of interest (short protocol; including animal welfare, use and documentation of pharmaceuticals, feeding and milk hygiene).

Figure 1

Counts of registered deficiencies on a farm in Vorarlberg, Austria.



A surprising but very positive result was that the farmers were personally very self-critical and honest. The farmers' results did not differ from those of the veterinarians, and, if they did, the farmer showed a poorer result due to a stricter view of his or her situation. The greatest variations could be found within the group of veterinarians (Figure 1). In the first year this was unavoidable due to a lack of time for offering sufficient instruction, but this could be improved significantly in the following years.

The results in respect of the level of animal welfare on the farms were as expected. The main problem was the width of the standings for tethered cows. Another obvious issue is that truly urgent cases were the result of inadequate management.

The system was improved in the following years in Vorarlberg. One important finding was that veterinarians have two different roles in respect of animal health and welfare at farm level, and that they should not be confused. The National Animal Health Service (AHS) is an institution of quality assurance based on a farmer and 'approved' veterinarian partnership. Both have signed a contract and work together to fulfil the legal requirements, including the provision of documentation for the responsible authority. On the other hand, the 'official' veterinarian of the responsible authority is obligated to implement animal welfare legislation and give particular attention to the control of regulations to be implemented.

Outlook

Checklists and manuals for cattle, pigs, poultry, sheep and goats are to be completed this year (2006) and the self-evaluation system will be implemented throughout Austria. These documents should be available initially to all participants of the National Animal Health Service. Farmers participating in this programme can personally and voluntarily check their housing systems against the given standards. The results of the self-evaluation process can be

discussed with the veterinarian who attends to the farm. Farmers holding a veterinarian's certification of their participation in the self-evaluation process are placed in a lower risk category and are less controlled by executive authorities. In a second step, the veterinarians will have to check the plausibility of the farmers' self-evaluation. If required, recommendation will be given for the farmer to take advisory help in respect of animal husbandry, agricultural buildings, ventilation, hygiene, etc.

The manuals should be ultimately the common basis for advisory boards, companies, authorities assessing compliance with national legislation, and all institutions working in this field.

Conclusions and animal welfare implications

A new concept for passing on knowledge regarding animal welfare to the farmer in Austria will be realised. By means of specific checklists and manuals, each farmer will be able to understand the requirements of animal welfare law and to realise them on the farm. This independent self-evaluation process motivates the farmer and fosters awareness of animal welfare issues. The first experiences of practical use in the Province of Vorarlberg showed that this strategy is a perfect and well-accepted method for bringing information to the farmer, and that farmers are very self-critical and honest.

In conclusion, the concept presented in this paper makes up-to-date information about animal welfare directly available to the farmer and helps to improve the situation on the farm.

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