Obstacles and welfare

NO ONE could accuse the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) of having been inactive of late. Just two weeks after publishing a document setting out a strategy that it believes will lead to steady improvements in the welfare of farm animals over the next 20 years (VR, October 17, 2009, vol 165, p 451), the FAWC has now published an opinion on the welfare of dairy cows (see p 514 of this issue). Although primarily concerned with the situation in the UK, the document might usefully be read in conjunction with a separate opinion on dairy cow welfare published by the European Food Safety Authority in July (VR, July 25, 2009, vol 165, p 94).

This latest opinion from the FAWC considers progress since the council last reported on dairy cow welfare in 1997. It makes sobering reading. It notes, in particular, that while there have been many improvements and initiatives in the dairy industry to address key welfare issues over the past decade, the evidence shows that the welfare of dairy cows has not improved significantly. It further notes that the main concerns identified in its previous report, in relation to endemic disease, infrastructure and stockmanship, still persist today. It draws attention to a number of ‘critical issues’ that the FAWC believes need to be addressed, relating to 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; the lack of centralised recording schemes yielding data at a national level; breeding policies for dairy cattle; and public surveillance of welfare. It also makes a number of recommendations which anyone with an interest in the health and welfare of dairy cows, as well as the economics of dairy production, would do well to consider.

Efforts to improve the welfare of dairy cows must be seen in the context of the economic pressures on the industry. As the FAWC points out, husbandry methods have changed significantly over the past 10 years, as economic pressures have forced British farmers to seek greater efficiencies. It also points out that the low profitability of dairy farming has compromised investment and maintenance on many farms, including investment in disease prevention, and may have hindered progress in reducing the incidence of lameness, mastitis and metabolic diseases. Investment in animal health and welfare has been shown to improve farm profitability, but it will be of little comfort to those working hard to improve standards that the economic pressures facing the industry show no sign of diminishing.

The FAWC’s opinion deals with a specific animal welfare issue in a particular country, but another recently published report considers animal welfare generally, and on a global scale. ‘Capacity building to implement good animal welfare practices’, a report of a Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Expert Meeting held at the FAO’s headquarters in Rome last year, emphasises the importance of good animal welfare practices not just for animals but also for humans. The FAO has decided to give more explicit and strategic attention to animal welfare in its capacity-building activities in countries with developing economies, and the expert meeting was convened to determine how best to set about this.

The FAO’s report highlights the fact that millions of people around the world are highly dependent on animals, whether for food, transport or other reasons, and that many good animal welfare practices have multiple benefits for humans as well as animals. It also notes that animal welfare problems are extremely diverse, and that food production systems and attitudes to welfare vary greatly. Despite all these differences, certain generic problems occur on a global basis. It identifies basic principles that can be widely applied, and makes recommendations on this basis.

The FAO’s report reflects the higher profile being given to animal welfare internationally and also serves to illustrate the scale of the task ahead. The increased focus on animal welfare is hugely welcome, but obstacles need to be overcome at every level. The challenge, whether locally, nationally or internationally, will be to translate good intentions into real improvements.

The FAO’s report ‘Capacity building to implement good animal welfare practices’ is available at www.fao.org/ag/againfo/resources/en/pubs_awelf.html