Comment

Seeking more assurance

TO what extent can farm assurance deliver welfare?

That was the question posed in 2005 by the Farm Animal Welfare Council in a report on the animal welfare implications of farm assurance schemes (VR, July 16, 2005, vol 157, p 65). Eight years on, the Farm Animal Welfare Committee (FAWC) (the council’s successor) has revisited the issue, to see how much progress is being made (see p 331 of this issue). Now, as then, the answer seems to be that such schemes can indeed bring about improvements in animal welfare, and in some instances have been shown to do so. However, the latest report¹ makes clear that, while some progress has been made since 2005, there is still much to do before the potential benefits can begin to be fully realised.

The report notes that, for various reasons, not all of them to do with welfare, farm assurance schemes have developed significantly over the past 20 years and that, by setting and implementing standards for livestock production that include animal welfare, they have become the mainstay of welfare governance in most livestock sectors. At the same time, it points out, assurance schemes have penetrated different sectors to varying extents and, even within sectors, the standards applied may differ. Referring to schemes run by retailers, it notes these are generally intended to give them a market advantage over their competitors. While acknowledging that such ‘competitive standard setting’ has led to some important improvements in animal welfare, it expresses concern that ‘standards are sometimes being changed with little evidence of genuine whole-life animal welfare gain’.

The application of different standards by different retailers, it points out, can add to the burdens on suppliers; importantly, it can also confuse consumers, reducing their ability to make informed buying decisions based on welfare.

Customer choice is an important driver in helping to improve standards and the FAWC has long emphasised the need to make more information about the welfare provenance of foods available to consumers – for example, in its report on farm assurance in 2005, a report on food labelling in 2006 (VR, June 24, 2006, vol 158, pp 842-843) and a report on education, communication and knowledge application in 2011 (VR, January 7, 2012, vol 170, p 2). The dearth of such information is still clearly a bugbear for the committee which, in its latest report, notes that ‘It is eight years since the 2005 report and we still await GB Government’s response to FAWC’s frequent calls for significant improvements to food labelling in grocery and food service to inform the consumer about animal welfare – whether as a single mark or part of well publicised farm assurance schemes.’

It expresses concern, too, that, having previously called for more comparability between schemes both at home and abroad, and for mutual recognition of standards, this ‘remains elusive’. It calls for more transparency on how standards are set and the extent to which they are complied with, suggesting that, as things stand, there is generally little information available about how changes in scheme standards are decided on and applied. It reiterates the point made in 2005 that a sound farm health and welfare plan, with veterinary input, is essential to guarantee acceptable welfare; such planning needs to be active, with buy-in from the farmer, and, it points out, confirmation of such planning is a vital component of assurance. It also points out that schemes need to focus more on stockmanship.

Some of the FAWC’s strongest comments relate to the welfare provenance of foods bought through public procurement, and foods obtained for the service sector: ‘Public procurement should at least be consistent with [Defra’s] departmental policy, which is to improve the welfare of farm animals,’ it says, noting that ‘Government should set an example for all food purchase chains through its own actions.’

Regarding the food service sector, it notes that this supplies up to half the food consumed in the UK. However, it says, although there has been some penetration of food assurance schemes in the larger companies, the food service sector otherwise provides little information on animal welfare standards. ‘The presumption that eating “outside the home” equates to sudden amnesia over animal welfare for all consumers is permissive and will hopefully diminish once animal welfare becomes a greater demand issue,’ it says, arguing that the food service sector should be included in all future developments.

The FAWC remains sensitive to the fact that efforts to improve animal welfare can be undermined by imports of cheaper foods from countries applying lower welfare standards and its report reiterates earlier calls for the labelling of imported products that do not meet minimum UK standards.

Overall, in discussing what has and what might be achieved, the report leaves the impression that assurance remains a strong force for good in terms of improving animal welfare. At the same time, it would seem that more direction is needed, including clearer leadership from government. This may not be altogether in line with the prevailing political mood but, as the FAWC has argued previously in a report on the economics of welfare, animal welfare is a ‘public good’, subject to many complex factors, and too important to be left to market forces alone (VR, December 17, 2011, vol 169, p 644).


doi: 10.1136/vr.f6111
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Veterinary Record 2013 173: 330
doi: 10.1136/vr.f6111

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