

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

Does present Legislation Help Animal Welfare?



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Factors which affect the welfare of farm animals Legislation has effects on how people house and manage animals but several other factors also affect this. Codes of practice produced by governments, the animal production industry, or companies which purchase the products from farmers and sell them to the public have an effect. Each of these kinds of influence on the treatment of animals, and hence on their welfare, will be considered together with the consequences of efforts to make animal production more economically efficient and the impact of international trade agreements.

The actual effect of legislation on the welfare of animals depends upon the responses of those owning and managing the animals. This response, in turn, depends upon the nature of any enforcement. Some systems for farm animal production will not continue if they are made illegal because they depend upon large manufacturers who are easily forced to change to a legal system.

Other aspects of legislation can be enforced only by checks on farm, transport vehicles, markets, slaughter-houses etc. and the extent of law-breaking will be sig-

nificantly affected by the frequency and quality of the checks. There are regional and national differences in the extent to which legislation is viewed seriously by those involved in the animal production business. The general direction of movement within the European Union in this respect is towards better enforcement in all member states because it is manifestly unfair for there to be significant differences in the extent of compliance with the laws.

Government-produced codes of practice

Guides to how particular farm animals should be housed, and managed and guides to procedures during transport, in slaughter houses or in relation to particular farm emergencies such as fire or to diseases are produced by some governments. In some countries such codes of practice have a legal status in that they can be referred to in situations where there is a question as to whether a generally-worded law is being broken. However, aspects of codes of practice are sometimes widely ignored by the animal production industry. If there is no enforcement of the statements in the code



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of practice, or if there is ambiguity about the legal status of the code, its value is greatly diminished. The effect on the welfare of animals may then be very little.

Production-industry-derived codes of practice

There can be important improvements in the welfare of farm animals if good codes of practice are devised by the industry and implemented by the majority of farmers, transporters, slaughterhouses, etc. The public image of the industry can be substantially improved and the sales of products maintained or increased if it is perceived by the public that standards are good and are observed. However, in most countries, at present the public has insufficient trust in the animal production industry to take the word of producers that standards are observed. Some independent checking is needed.

Retailer-produced codes of practice

Farmers often sell animals or their production of milk, eggs etc. to single purchasers who represent large retail chains or wholesale distribution companies. The increase in direct selling to supermarket chains has led to considerable power being placed in the hands of these supermarket companies. It is possible for these purchasers to lay down conditions for animal production and to enforce these by inspection. The standards set by the supermarket chains are determined by what people will buy and by their reputation with the public.

The public image of large companies which retail food, including supermarket chains and fast-food companies, is of great importance to them. Bad publicity because of a risk to public health, a risk to the environment or the occurrence of poor welfare at any stage of the production process can be very damaging. Hence it is in the interest of such food companies to avoid any scandal which might threaten their good image. When these companies receive many letters from consumers complaining about a product which they sell, they have to take notice of the points which are being made. As a consequence of consumer pressure, food retail companies are adopting standards which they impose on their suppliers.

The enforcement of standards by food retailers has led to substantial changes in the welfare of animals on farms because every producer has to conform to the standards in order to sell their products. The rapid development of such schemes in several countries has, in general, been based on scientific evidence about animal welfare.

Effects of builders and designers of animal facilities and equipment

It is the people who design and build farm animal facilities and the people who own, manage and work on farms, transport operations and slaughterhouses who have the principal effects on animal welfare. The actions of these people may depend to some extent on expert advice, for example that of veterinary surgeons.



The architects, builders and equipment companies who provide accommodation and other facilities for those in the food animal production industry, depend upon their customers in the sense that their products would not be bought if they were not economically viable but they also have freedom to be innovative and they are perceived by the public and the farmers to have moral obligations to animals similar to those of the farmers themselves. Some of these moral pressures are not as immediate, however, so these companies are not always ready to acknowledge their responsibilities. Attitudes of farmers, transporters, slaughterhouse staff etc.

Public concern about animal welfare has increased in many countries during the last thirty years and especially in the last ten years. Evidence for increased concern about animal welfare.

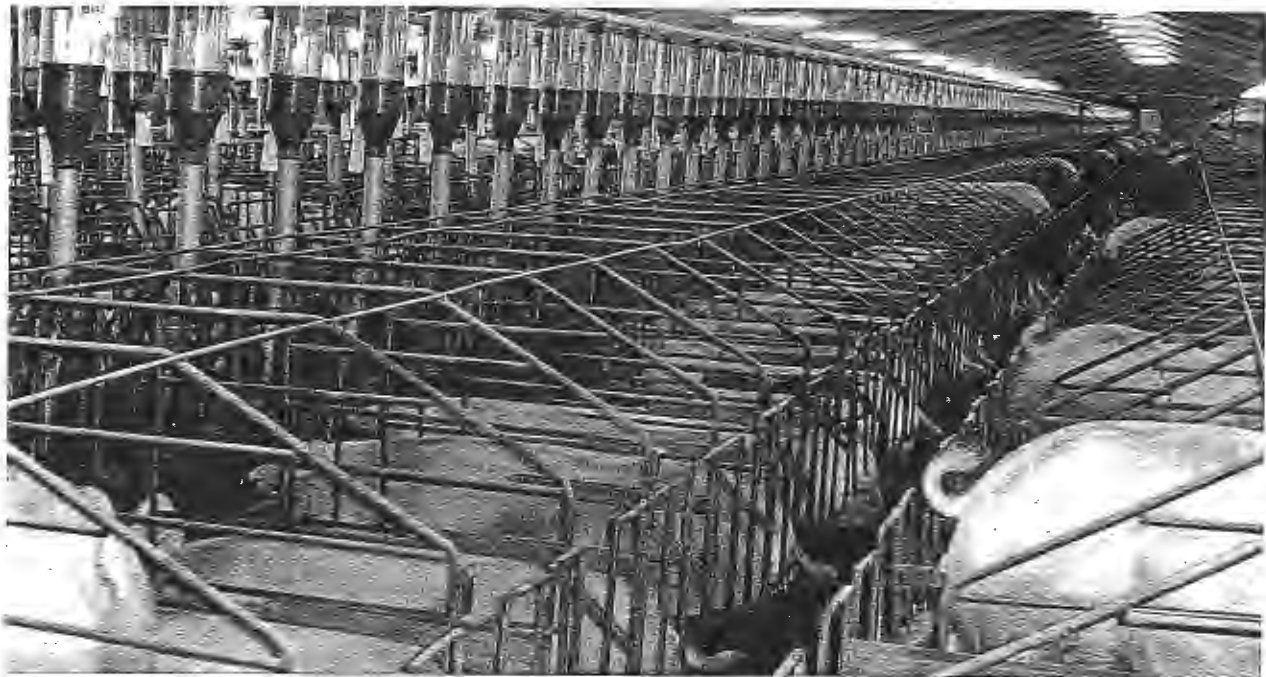
People who run or work on farms are influenced by a variety of factors when they are deciding on their housing and management policies and when they are executing these policies. They are involved in a commercial enterprise and will be endeavouring to make a profit so the monetary costs which they incur and the potential financial returns which they are likely to get for their product will be factors of major importance to them. Some other costs to the

industry exist, for example, consumers who do not like some aspect of production may refuse to buy the product (Broom 1994). These costs are often ignored by individual farmers.

Attitudes of animal users depend upon early training, traditional practices, acquisition of knowledge from others subsequent to any training, personal experience and general beliefs and philosophy. Training did not, until recently, include much information about animal welfare except where it impinged on profitability. Recent training courses are more likely to have included information about the welfare of the animals and most agricultural trade journals nowadays do cover animal welfare issues. Traditional practices are often deemed by farmers to be right for the sole reason that "this is the way that we have always done it". Some of these methods are the best ones for good welfare but in a time of changing attitudes to animals, such arguments are untenable.

Farmers and other animal users have to live with their families, friends and neighbours. If these people are critical of the effects on the welfare of animals of the methods used, the farmer may change these methods. In some cases, the animals are very obvious to all who pass by the farm. Farmers do not like to be thought incompetent or uncaring, so they may respond to such comments by giving the animals veterinary treatment or changing the management system so as to avoid lameness. If the animals are inside a building or otherwise hidden from public view, the number of people who might comment on poor welfare will be smaller and there is a greater chance that the farmer can persuade himself or herself that there are no significant welfare problems.

The views of the general public are largely made known to farmers and others involved in animal production via the media. There is frequent coverage of animal welfare issues in newspapers, on radio and on the television and this, by bringing scientific knowledge about animal complexity to the attention of most people, affects the attitudes of people and then comes to represent it. Farmers see themselves portrayed as uncaring in some respects. They are unfairly



portrayed on some occasions but other portrayals are correct and the farmer cannot hide from them by retreating physically into buildings and socially into a farming only society.

When public demonstrations about animal welfare issues occur, farmers cannot ignore these. The demonstrations by great numbers of largely orderly and apparently normal people against the shipping of calves to conditions which were illegal within the United Kingdom, had a big influence on farmers and politicians

alike. It is not the most vociferous people, who are sometimes rather extreme in their views, who have the greatest influence on animal users or politicians but the moderate people who represent a groundswell of public opinion. In many recent surveys in Europe, animal welfare has been shown to be an important issue for the general public.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Consult the publishers.



Public concern about animal welfare has increased in many countries.