

Farmers and animal welfare in cattle farming

Research has been carried out among 360 cattle farmers, focusing on the viewpoint of farmers engaged in dairy production, beef production or veal production in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The sample of cattle farmers was stratified according to the type of quality assurance scheme the farmers participated in. The types of quality assurance schemes differ from each other in the level of focus on animal welfare.

All cattle farmers considered it an essential aspect of good farming to provide good care for animals. Good care ensures animal welfare and good performance of the animals, which again results in good income. Cattle farmers who participated in the basic and top quality assurance schemes differed in their definition of 'good animal welfare' from cattle farmers who participated in specific animal welfare and organic schemes. Farmers in the first group described animal welfare in terms of animal health, comfortable housing conditions and the absence of stress. Farmers in the second group defined animal welfare as the possibility for the animals to express natural behaviour. Both groups agreed about why animal welfare is important and how it could be assessed.

The cattle farmers who decided to enter specific animal welfare schemes did so because it improved their market position or because they agreed with the animal welfare specifications of the scheme. Cattle farmers who chose organic production referred to ethical concerns but also to the improvement of their market position. The ethical concerns of farmers related mainly to concerns about the environment and food safety and not to worries about animal welfare problems in cattle farming.

In the majority of participating countries – apart from Italy, where non-participation in quality assurance schemes is fairly common – farmers felt pressured to participate in a quality assurance scheme as their buyers either refused to buy products from farmers who did not participate in a quality assurance scheme or did so only at a reduced price. In general, cattle farmers thought that the average consumer wanted animal-friendly products but was not willing to pay extra money for these products. Apart from the Italian and Swedish farmers, most farmers thought that retailers could play a major role in the development of animal-friendly production; but farmers were sceptical about whether retailers really wanted to play this role. In line with this, many cattle farmers in France, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom did not believe that animal-friendly products would be successful in the market. In their opinion, there were hardly any problems with animal welfare in their sector. As a result, the difference between regular products and animal-friendly products would be too small to convince the consumer to buy animal-friendly products.

Differences across countries

There was little difference between countries with regard to farmers' attitude towards animal welfare, animal welfare legislation, animal welfare during transport and slaughter, or their belief in animal friendly products. This can in part be explained by the fact that the context of cattle farming is quite similar across the six countries in terms of production circumstances as well as legislation.

Differences across quality assurance schemes

There was little difference between cattle farmers who participated in basic or top quality schemes and farmers who participated in specific animal welfare or organic schemes with regard to their perception of animal welfare legislation or their readiness to accept new animal welfare measures. Generally speaking, all farmers were ready to accept all measures proposed in this research.

Differences across production systems

In order to understand the differences in farmers' attitudes, beliefs and behaviour towards animal welfare, differences between cattle subsectors are more important than differences between countries or quality assurance schemes. How farmers thought about animal welfare was affected by the type of production system that they were involved in. This can be explained by differences in farming practices, in farmers' contacts and relations with animals, but also by different experiences with public concern about animal welfare.

Veal farmers have been confronted with public concerns about animal welfare for many years, and the sector has been subject to numerous animal welfare campaigns and numerous alterations in legislation. The veal farmers thought that they had invested enough for the time being and were not ready to accept more stringent legislation. Beef and dairy farmers felt that there were no serious animal welfare problems in their subsector. They felt also little pressure from public concern, government and animal welfare campaigners to change their ways of production.

The most importance difference between veal, beef and dairy farmers was regarding their perception of animals and their relations with them. Suckling cow farmers generally kept their animals outdoors, on pastures or nature conservation grounds; the possibility of expressing natural behaviour was in their view an important precondition for the welfare of animals. The same applied generally for dairy farmers. Veal farmers, who produce indoors, very intensively and have to raise very young and vulnerable animals, did not refer to behavioural aspects at all but focused on animal health.

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