

Towards a Welfare Quality[®] Assessment System



Welfare Quality[®] researchers have developed assessment systems to evaluate and monitor the quality of animal welfare on farms or at slaughter. These systems will help producers or slaughterhouse managers to understand the level of animal welfare on their unit and to streamline the alignment of their practices with certification programmes that guarantee high standards of animal welfare for consumers. Farmers too will benefit from the further improvement of animal welfare levels based on feedback from the assessments completed on their farms.

Assessment Systems for Seven Livestock Species

After discussions with consumers and scientists, representatives of key stakeholder groups, and policy makers, Welfare Quality[®] defined four animal welfare principles: Good housing, good feeding, good health and appropriate behaviour. Within these principles 12 distinct – but complementary – animal welfare criteria were identified. This is described in the fact sheet ‘Principles and Criteria of Good Animal Welfare.’ The practical assessment systems developed by Welfare Quality[®] researchers measure each of these 12 criteria in seven livestock species: dairy cattle, beef cattle, veal calves, sows, fattening pigs, laying hens and broilers. These systems have now been tested on more than 700 farms across nine European countries, from the UK to the Czech Republic, from Sweden to Spain, and even on farms in South America.

How the Systems Were Developed

Researchers recognised that the best assessments came from observing the animals themselves. For each livestock species, around 30 and 50 different animal-based measures were identified in order to verify compliance with the 12 different

criteria for farms or slaughterhouses. Based on scientific literature or research projects carried out by Welfare Quality[®] scientists, these measures were tested to make sure they accurately reflected the actual welfare of the animal.

On top of that, each measure had to be clear enough so that anyone could perform the assessment quickly and accurately after a short training period. The key for users of these systems is how practical they are to implement.

Because animals are kept in so many different environments, it's important that the measures work across all systems. Since most of the measures developed by Welfare Quality[®] are animal-based, an assessor could verify the level of animal welfare by looking at the animal itself irrespective of how and where it is kept. An example of this is injuries, where the animal's body condition could be evaluated on-farm or at the slaughterhouse.

Due to group sizes, time restraints and other factors, it wasn't always possible to use animal-based measures. In these instances, resource- or management-based ones were used instead. For example, the absence of prolonged thirst is difficult to

The assessment systems are developed within the second Sub-project of Welfare Quality®. This Sub-project aims to contribute towards developing an integrated, standardised methodology for the assessment of animal welfare in cattle, pigs and poultry from farm to slaughter. This methodology is to be scientifically based and emphasises animal-based measures, while also including important resource-based and management-based measures. Prof. Linda Keeling is the Sub project leader, linda.keeling@hnh.slu.se.

measure based on the animal's appearance or behaviour, but an acceptable alternative is to look at the number of accessible water troughs.

The measures were evaluated on three criteria: validity (does it measure what we think it does), repeatability (do different observers generate the same outcome), and feasibility (is it possible to use the measure given the constraints of a practical assessment system, e.g. its duration).

Putting the Systems Into Practice

To ensure that these systems were practical, scientists had to find a way in which all the important criteria could be monitored by any number of trained assessors who would all achieve similar results.

At first, "full" assessment systems were developed. These contained the animal-based measures as well as a lot of information about resources and management on the farm. Gathering all this information took about a day to complete. However, once the measures from the full assessment are fully analysed, researchers can adopt a practical approach by paring down the assessment to create a system that could be completed in a much shorter time while still accounting for all 12 animal welfare criteria. A similar approach

has been used to develop assessment systems for slaughterhouses.

To complement these systems, Welfare Quality® has joined with an independent standardisation institute to create the first comprehensive European set of protocols for assessing farm animal welfare. These protocols can be used not only to assess the animals' welfare but also to provide feedback, advice and support to producers, thereby helping them to benefit from entry to some higher value markets. Furthermore, they will yield clear and reliable information for retailers and consumers on the welfare status of animals from which their food products were derived.

The assessment systems for all seven species will be published in late 2009, although they should continue to be updated in the light of new scientific evidence. This is the final step in the five-year Welfare Quality® project that is working to bring practical animal welfare guidelines and assessment systems to Europe's farms and slaughterhouses.

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Welfare Quality® is a European research project focusing on the integration of animal welfare in the food quality chain. The project aims to accommodate societal concerns and market demands, to develop reliable on-farm monitoring systems, product information systems, and practical species-specific strategies to improve farm animal welfare. Forty-four institutes and universities, representing thirteen European countries and four Latin American countries, participate in this integrated research project.

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