

On-farm Animal Welfare Assessments and Audits in the UK

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Abstract

Other than in a research context, the route through which welfare assessments and audits are implemented for production animals is farm assurance. Farm assurance can affect the welfare of animals through encouraging improvements in welfare by setting good standards of provision for animals, through excluding systems which are inherently bad for welfare from certification or through discouraging the very poorest farmers from continuing in business. However, as farm assurance originated in response to changes in UK food safety legislation, conflicts can exist between requirements of food safety measures, environmental protection and animal welfare. To date, the evidence that farm assurance is actively improving the welfare of animals within systems is not compelling, although the more extensive management practices required by the Soil Association organic farming scheme have recently been shown to result in less lameness and hock damage.

Résumé

Autrement que dans un cadre de recherche, la vérification du bien-être animal pour les animaux de production passe par l'assurance de la ferme. L'assurance de la ferme peut affecter le bien-être des animaux en encourageant des améliorations du bien-être par la mise en place de bons standards pour le soin des animaux, par l'exclusion de systèmes qui sont néfastes pour le bien-être, par la certification ou par l'incitation des producteurs les plus démunis à se retirer des affaires. Toutefois, comme l'assurance de la ferme au Royaume-Uni a pris naissance en raison de changements dans les lois régissant la sécurité des aliments, des conflits peuvent se présenter entre les besoins pour assurer la sécurité des aliments, la protection de l'environnement et le bien-être animal. À ce jour, la preuve n'est pas faite que l'assurance de la ferme améliore directement le bien-être des animaux dans les systèmes bien que les pratiques récentes de régie plus extensives requises par le regroupement des agriculteurs biologiques ont effectivement réduit l'incidence de boiterie et les problèmes de jarrets.

Farm Assurance

Farm assurance schemes are the route through which on-farm animal welfare assessments are most likely to be applied. Farm assurance schemes in the UK came about after the introduction of the Food Safety Act,⁶ which outlined the types of offenses that anyone involved in food production could be implicated in. These included failure to produce food of the nature, substance and quality demanded; falsely or misleadingly describing foods; or supplying foods rendered injurious to health; supplying unfit (decomposed and putrid) food; supplying food so contaminated that it would be unreasonable to expect it to be eaten. The defense for a food producer is to prove he or she took all reasonable precautions and exercised due diligence to avoid commission of the offense. So the original purpose of farm assurance was to implement a system which set standards to ensure compliance with the Food Safety Act⁶ and to offer external verification that these standards were being complied with, thus demonstrating due diligence. Farm assurance bodies claim to offer "whole chain" assurance from the farm to the consumer shopping basket--"farm to fork"--encompassing not only the farm but haulers, abattoirs and suppliers.

Much of the original driver for setting up farm assurance schemes came from the large food retail outlets who have been major influencers in the setting of compliance standards for farmers. As the system has evolved in the UK, it has become multilayered and complex. The bodies that set the standards are sometimes independent of, or sometimes directly linked to a large retailer. Independent certification bodies now employ inspectors to check compliance with rules laid out by the standards, and they may well be certifying for a number of schemes and standards. Part of this came about through a need to reduce the number of annual inspections and inspectors required for farmers, as there appeared to be a danger that numbers of inspections were escalating out of control.

As this system of enforcement evolved, some opportunities were spotted: 1) It was initially suggested that farmers who joined these schemes would be able to command a premium price for their products, as

they would have an exclusive assurance label. This has largely turned out to be untrue, and now most farmers have no choice but to be farm-assured in order to have access to the marketplace. In addition, farmers or their co-operatives usually pay subscriptions to each assurance scheme they belong to. Many farmers now perceive farm assurance as a costly, time-consuming administrative exercise with which they have no choice but to comply. 2) Some organizations saw farm assurance as a vehicle for promoting standards in additional areas over and above food safety. For example, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) accredited Freedom Food scheme has a particular focus on assuring animal welfare and the LEAF Marque stands for Linking the Environment and Farming.

Despite the recent rationalizing of how farm assurance schemes are administered on-farm there remain a large number of schemes which certify specific aspects of the farms' activities and farmers can find themselves having to join a number of different schemes to enable them to market their products. To give some idea of the number and breadth of farm assurance schemes, Figure 1 shows the different schemes run by Assured Food Standards (AFS) who are represented by the "Little Red Tractor" logo.

Animal Welfare within Farm Assurance

The RSPCA accredited Freedom Food scheme highlighted the potential role for Farm Assurance schemes in promoting animal welfare. Following the model of other farm assurance schemes, the Freedom Food scheme laid out standards of animal management that, if complied with, were believed to inevitably lead to good animal welfare. Many of these standards were based around

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- AFS Sugar Beet Standards
 - Assured British Meat
 - Assured British Pigs
 - Assured Chicken Production
 - Assured Combinable Crops (covering cereals, oilseeds and protein crops)
 - Assured Produce (covering fruit, salad and vegetables)
 - Farm Assured British Beef and Lamb
 - Farm Assured Welsh Lamb and Beef
 - Genesis Quality Assurance Scheme (beef, lamb and combinable crops)
 - National Dairy Farmers Assurance Scheme (milk)
 - Northern Irish Beef and Lamb Farm Quality Assurance
 - Scottish Quality Cereals
 - Quality Meat Scotland
 - Quality Standard Mark (English beef and lamb)
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Figure 1. Farm Assurance Schemes administered by Assured Food Standards (AFS).

the provision of the Five Freedoms (Figure 2). The Five Freedoms are an aspirational blueprint for delivering animal welfare which were initiated by the Brambell Report,² and then refined to their current form by the Farm Animal Welfare Council.⁵

Products labelled with the Freedom Food logo are available for purchase by customers who choose to shop with an ethical agenda which includes animal welfare. Customers are expected to pay a higher price for these products, however, with the exception of beef, this premium payment has not filtered through to the farmer.

The wider effect of schemes such as Freedom Food and LEAF was to demonstrate to the more "mainstream" assurance schemes that they needed a wider remit than food safety alone. The result of this has been that aspects such as animal welfare assurance and environmentally friendly farming practices have been incorporated into all standards to varying degrees. All schemes which assure animal production systems now ensure that as a minimum animal welfare legislation⁷ is included within their standards, and many refer to the codes of practice for stock keeping published by the British government.³

The organic farming sector, including organizations such as the Soil Association and Organic Farmers and Growers (OF&G), run their own schemes which comply with European organic standards. Many consumers have been encouraged to perceive that organic products are produced to higher welfare standards than those produced conventionally. In 2000, this claim was successfully overturned by the UK Advertising Standards.¹ The Soil Association is now leading the way in trying to promote animal welfare within its standards and to address some of the welfare conflicts which can arise as a result of organic production.

Does Farm Assurance Deliver Good Animal Welfare?

In a study⁹ examining the impact of the RSPCA Freedom Food scheme on the welfare of dairy cattle,

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- **Freedom from hunger and thirst** by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
 - **Freedom from discomfort** by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
 - **Freedom from pain, injury and disease** by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
 - **Freedom to express normal behaviour** by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.
 - **Freedom from fear and distress** by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.
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Figure 2. The Five Freedoms.

assessments were made through examination of farms' records, farmers' estimates of incidence of disease and independent observations of the behavior and physical condition of the cows. The outcome of these measures was compared between farms belonging to the Freedom Food scheme and farms belonging to a range of other schemes. The Freedom Food farms performed less well than other farms for welfare indicators including hock injuries, lameness and restrictions in rising behavior, describing cows with a higher degree of movement-related and resting discomfort. By contrast, Freedom Food farms performed better in terms of indicators such as mastitis, cleanliness and body condition. It was also clear from the study and illustrated in a separate paper¹¹ that, regardless of scheme, welfare problems remained highly prevalent among UK dairy cattle. As a result of this work it is now widely accepted that setting standards of provision alone is insufficient to ensure good welfare. It can be postulated that a level of attention to detail and awareness of animals' welfare needs is required among animal caretakers in order to improve welfare. It also must be recognised that setting standards to try to improve welfare in a scheme that is inherently bad from an animal welfare perspective is unlikely to succeed.

However, farm assurance schemes do have a role in improving animal welfare which may be impossible to demonstrate from studies such as the one described above. One of the objectives stated by farm assurance was to remove the least competent farmers from the industry. This may be for failure to comply with food safety standards, but could as easily be for those who persistently fail to comply with even the most basic animal welfare provision standards. In addition, some organizations set standards that prohibit farming practices which they deem unacceptable. For example, Freedom Food does not accept intensive battery caged laying hen production systems into their scheme. Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) carried out an analysis⁸ of the main UK farm assurance scheme standards in terms of whether some key husbandry systems which are considered to be determinants of good welfare, i.e., less intensive, access to outdoors, lower stocking densities, provision of bedding, appropriate feeding, avoidance of mutilations, good quality stockmanship, were included as requisites. The conclusion of the report was that most farm assurance schemes failed to include the majority of these key welfare determinants as defining characteristics of their schemes.

The CIWF report⁸ did, however, note that Soil Association organic standards performed considerably better than other schemes in terms of setting standards that met key welfare determinants. This is likely because the ethos of organic farming is to encourage extensive production methods. This conclusion is in part borne

out by evidence from a recently published report from the Scottish Agricultural College¹⁰ examining the welfare of dairy cows in organic milk production systems. The report indicated that levels of lameness and hock damage were lower on organic farms as a result of shorter winter housing periods and a higher age at first calving for heifers both elements of the more extensive husbandry approach described in organic standards. However, it is also worth noting that overall very few differences were found between the welfare of cows on organic and non-organic farms, with large variations in welfare seen in both groups.

The Role of Farm Assurance in Animal Welfare Improvement

Farm assurance has become an integral part of the food production and supply process in the UK. There is evidence that farm assurance can have a role in influencing animal welfare through the standards they set. For example, they could ensure that production systems that represent an unacceptably high cost to animal welfare are not certified. There is, however, no evidence that this is happening on a large scale in the UK. Figure 3 considers farm assurance's role in animal welfare improvement. Farm assurance is largely an enforcement tool which aims to discourage bad practice through inspection and certification. As farmers are aware in the UK, farm assurance also has a supportive role in allowing farmers access to their marketplace, although this usually takes a negative form in that farms cannot sell unless they have farm assurance certification. There is the more positive, although largely theoretical, potential for farm assurance to provide incentives for good animal welfare, most obviously through price differentiation and premium pricing that is returned to the farmer. In theory farm assurance could act as a route for information and knowledge transfer to farmers, although perceived conflicts between the roles of certifiers and advisors mean that this is not currently happening.

Figure 3 also considers those farms that are currently delivering, or very actively working towards delivering, good welfare. Members of this group are knowledge acquirers in their own right and are probably little influenced or affected by farm assurance as an inspection. Different forms of intervention are likely to be more relevant to this group. A more detailed discussion can be found in the article by H.R. Whay cited in reference 12, but in terms of farm assurance both Freedom Food and Soil Association have been working towards implementing animal-based welfare assessments within their schemes using assessment protocols based on the Bristol Welfare Assurance Programme (BWAP) (see <http://www.vetschool.bris.ac.uk/animalwelfare>). The

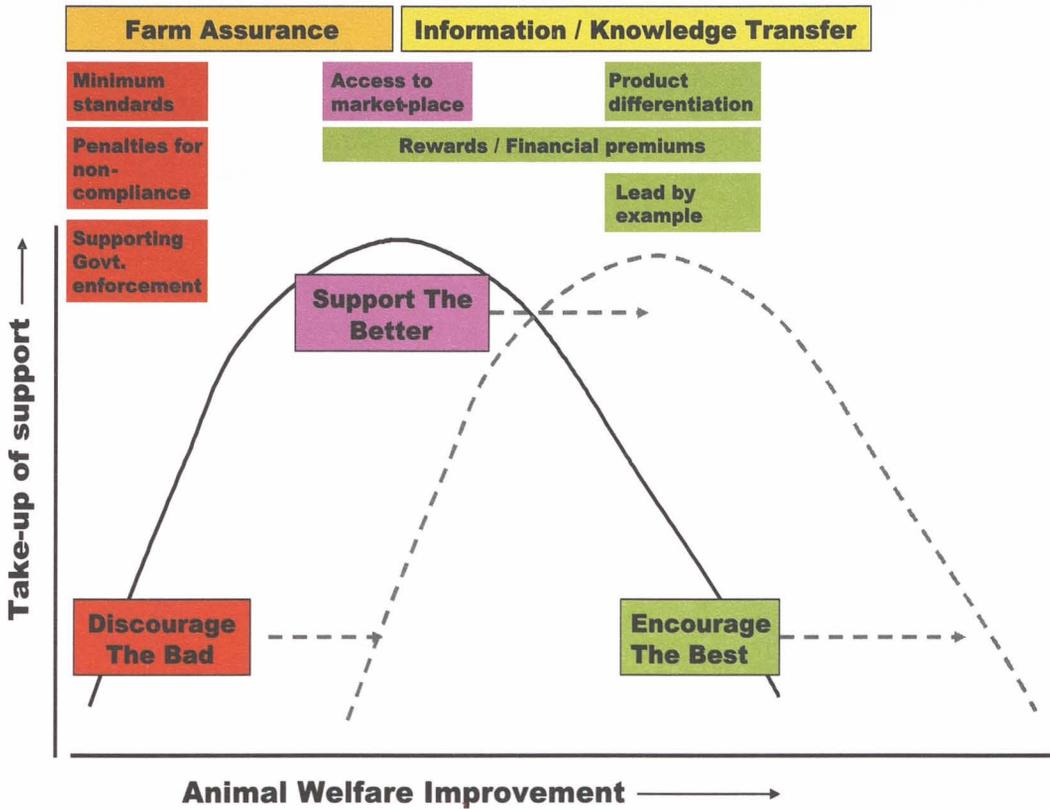


Figure 3. The schematic diagram illustrating potential roles of farm assurance in improving the welfare of farmed animals (adapted from DEFRA: *A framework for pro-environmental behaviours*⁴).

intention is to use the results of these animal-based assessments as both an enforcement tool and also as feedback to farmers to encourage comparison between farms and engender pride in good achievements.

Welfare Auditing

This paper has largely concentrated on farm assurance, as this represents a formal structure through which animal welfare change might be implemented. However, the concept of welfare auditing brings in an important dimension. The official definitions of inspection and auditing, according to international standard ISO 8402, are: “*Inspection: Activity such as measuring, examining, testing or gauging one or more characteristics of an entity and comparing the results with specified requirements in order to establish whether conformity is achieved for each characteristic*” and “*Auditing: Systematic and independent examination to determine whether qualities, activities and related results comply with planned arrangements and whether these arrangements are implemented effectively and are suitable to achieve objectives.*” While an inspection takes account of what is happening on the day of an inspector’s visit and tries to get an overview of historical activities, an

audit aims to give some assurance that good practices and good welfare that are observed on the day of the visit are likely to be sustained into the future. This can only be achieved through ensuring that mechanisms are in place to prevent problems and to take early and effective action should they arise. From a welfare point of view this is most likely to be achieved through herd health planning. The herd health plan is a management tool for farmers which comprises four elements: recording herd health and production data, reviewing these records, implementing actions based on the findings of the record review and re-evaluating outcomes. This process is intended to be responsive to identified problems and is particularly useful in an animal health context. The role of farm assurance assessors needs to broaden to take up auditing opportunities during inspections to ensure that these mechanisms of recognition and action when problems occur are in place and being actively implemented.

Conclusion

Farm assurance has recognized animal welfare as coming within its remit. However, with the exception of schemes such as Freedom Food and Soil Associa-

tion Certification there is currently little evidence of a genuine concerted aspiration among farm assurance schemes to use their role to push welfare improvement on farms. As well as implementation of Animal Welfare legislation which represents the minimum standard to be attained, farm assurance has opportunities to influence the intensity of production systems used, to drive the "bad welfare" producers out of business and to audit to ensure that good welfare practices are sustained between inspections.

Ultimately, farmers themselves have the most direct influence on animal welfare. Farm assurance can underpin their efforts to improve and will probably do this more successfully if it recognizes that farms fall into different categories of welfare management. Failing to offer differentiation between a persistently bad producer and an innovative and leading producer is likely to prop up the former and hamper and discourage the latter.

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