

The impact of organic livestock standards on animal welfare – a questionnaire survey of advisors, inspectors and veterinarians

Malla Hovi, Mohamed Kossaibati, Richard Bennett
School of Agriculture, Policy and Development, The University of Reading, PO Box 236, Reading RG6 6AT

Sandra A Edwards
University of Newcastle, Department of Agriculture

Jamie Robertson
University of Aberdeen, AUCOA

Stephen Roderick
Organic Studies Centre, Duchy College

ABSTRACT

A questionnaire survey of organic sector body inspectors, organic advisors and farm animal veterinarians was conducted to examine the respondents' perceptions of the ability of the organic standards to deliver positive impacts on welfare of organic livestock. A total of 44 separate standards concerning livestock production were extracted from the United Kingdom Register of Organic Food Production livestock production standards. The respondents were asked to consider the potential impact of each standard on animal welfare in comparison to the routine practices used on conventional farms, using a five-point scale (improve significantly, improve slightly, no impact, deteriorate slightly and deteriorate significantly). A simple scoring system was used to rank the different standards in terms of their perceived positive impact on animal welfare. The significance of differences between respondent groups and livestock species were examined. Preliminary findings of the survey are summarised and the usefulness of the approach to evaluate livestock production standards is discussed.

Key words: organic livestock production, animal welfare

INTRODUCTION

New European regulations on organic livestock production are not likely to strengthen the controls on many husbandry practices, whilst many conventional Farm Assurance schemes now have major animal welfare components. In this context, it is critical for the long-term credibility of organic production that certification bodies are able to demonstrate systems that deliver their animal welfare objectives. This is particularly important in the situation where some doubt has been expressed as to the animal welfare benefits that organic standards will deliver and where conflicts might arise from the different objectives of organic farming (Lund, 2000; FAWC, 2001).

The aim of this paper is to describe some preliminary results of a questionnaire survey of organic inspectors, farm advisors and veterinarians on the potential impact of organic standards on animal health and welfare, when compared to normal practices used on conventional UK livestock farms, and to discuss the usefulness of this methodology for the development of organic livestock standards.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A questionnaire was designed to assess the potential impact of the United Kingdom Register for Organic Food Standards livestock production standards (UKROFS, October 2000) on animal welfare. A series of 44 separate standards concerning livestock production for four livestock species: cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry were incorporated. Some standards applied to all four species, while others were concerned with individual species. In the main part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to state their perception of the impact of these standards on animal welfare in comparison to practices commonly seen in conventionally managed production systems. The respondents were asked to assess the standards in five impact categories: improve significantly, improve slightly, no impact, deteriorate slightly and deteriorate significantly.

Organic inspectors (N=46; the Soil Association, the Scottish Organic Production Association and Organic Farmers and Growers) and advisors (N=39; the Organic Advisory Service of the Elm Farm Research Centre and the Scottish Agriculture College) were presented with a questionnaire and were requested to complete questions relevant to the livestock species they had experience of working with. The following veterinary associations were surveyed: the British Cattle Veterinary Association (BCVA, N=1300), the Sheep Veterinary Society (SVS, N=800), the Pig Veterinary Society (PVS, N=450) and the British Veterinary Poultry Association (BVPA, N=204) with respect to their specialist species expertise (e.g. the Sheep Veterinary Society members answered only a questionnaire covering standards applicable to sheep production).

The data were analysed by ranking the standards according to a simple scoring system based on the proportion of respondents who perceived a standard to have an improving impact on animal welfare, with comparison of the differences between respondent groups and species.

RESULTS

The response rates in different respondent categories varied from 92% among advisors to 6% among the member of the BVPA. Whilst the overall response rates among the veterinary association members were low, over 50% of all veterinary respondents had substantial experience in organic livestock production by having one or more organic clients.

The overall results of the survey suggest that the standards were generally considered to have a potentially beneficial effect on animal welfare (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of % of respondents within the impact categories.

Distribution of results	(% of respondents)		
	Improve	No impact	Deteriorate
Minimum	0.0	0.0	0.0
1st quartile	50.0	10.0	0.0
2nd quartile	73.3	20.0	3.7
3rd quartile	85.0	31.2	13.3
Maximum	100.0	80.0	89.1

However, the results revealed significant differences of opinion between different respondent groups. The ranking of the standards also demonstrated that some of the standards are perceived to have a potentially deteriorating impact on animal welfare by the majority of respondents.

The following points highlight some of the key findings:

- Overall, 21 of the 44 assessed standards were considered to have a positive impact on animal welfare by more than 73% of the respondents (Group 1 and 2).
- Out of the remaining 23 standards, 13 (57%) were considered to have a positive impact on animal welfare by more than 50% of the respondents (Group 3).
- A total of 10 out of the 44 assessed standards were perceived to have a positive impact on animal welfare by less than 50% of the respondents (Group 4).
- Overall, there was a tendency for the inspectors and advisors to have a more positive perception of the animal welfare impact of standards than for the veterinary respondents.
- There was more agreement on the perceived impact of the standards between respondent groups with regard to the standards in Score groups 4 and 3 than in Score groups 2 and 1. However, there were significant differences between respondent groups in all score groups regarding individual standards. The majority of the differences were between inspector and veterinary respondents, with inspectors perceiving the standards in a more positive light in all cases.
- The majority of the standards in Score groups 2 and 1 (i.e. with the lowest proportion of respondents considering them beneficial to animal welfare) were regulations concerning restrictions on conventional medicine use and routine mutilations of farm animals. Notably, standards concerning feeding restrictions in the production of monogastric livestock fell into the lowest Score group.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Whilst the response rate among the members of the veterinary organisations was very low (6-13%), this may reflect both the more impersonal postal approach and the less organically focussed population surveyed. Many of the veterinarians

contacted would have had no direct experience of organic farming, and it is noteworthy that most of the veterinarians who responded had substantial experience of organic farming, with most of them having one or more organic clients.

Overall, the results indicate a very positive perception of the role of organic standards in improving animal welfare. However, the differences between respondent categories were of interest. In general, the degree of positive perception was related to the extent to which the respondent category was actively involved in work in the organic sector. Thus inspectors, who are fully involved, had a slightly more positive perspective than advisers, who often work in both organic and conventional sectors. Veterinarians, who generally had a background and majority of clients in the conventional sector, were least positive, in comparative terms. This distinction highlights a major issue with the methodology. Whilst those working full time in the sector might be considered to be best informed on practical consequences of the standards, those working across both sectors might be considered more impartial. Since external perception of organic production will be just as important as reality, in marketing terms, this is an issue that clearly needs addressing.

Whilst surveying perceptions of respondents on the potential impact of organic standards on animal welfare does not produce objective information on actual welfare conditions on organic farms, the authors suggest that this approach is a useful means to support expert-lead development of organic standards.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank all the respondents of the questionnaire and the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department (SEERAD) for financial support.

REFERENCES

- FAWC (2001) Interim report on the animal welfare implications of Farm Assurance schemes. Farm Animal Welfare Council Publications.
- UKROFS (2000) United Kingdom Register of Organic Food Standards – Organic livestock production standards, October 2000.
- Lund, V. (2000) Is there such a thing as “organic” animal welfare? Proceeding of the 2nd NAHWOA Workshop, Cordoba, 8-11 January 2000. 151-160.