

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Farm Animal Welfare Council: Some pain and distress in livestock production are unavoidable but should be minimized

In its report, “Farm Animal Welfare in Great Britain: Past, Present, and Future” (<http://tinyurl.com/njpmacf>), the Farm Animal Welfare Council sought to move the discussion of animal welfare beyond the Five Freedoms referenced by Walmart in its recent announcement to a discussion of the quality of life experienced by farm animals.

In that report the Council writes, “Achievement of high standards of animal welfare by all who are responsible for the supervision and care of farm animals requires not causing unnecessary suffering and provision of animal’s needs and some, but not all, of its wants. Some pain and distress are unavoidable in livestock husbandry with current knowledge and farming practice but the goal should be made to minimize their occurrence.

“Difficult ethical and agricultural decisions have to be made when dealing with suffering, sometimes by imposing a lesser act that may still cause pain or distress but provide long-term relief for the individual or group. Tail docking of lambs to minimize the risk of fly strike and beak trimming of laying hens to mitigate injurious pecking are examples. The long-term goal should be to eliminate the source of the problem through improved animal husbandry and breeding rather than to ameliorate the pain and distress, necessary as this is.”

The Council asserts that “**Welfare** ought to be monitored regularly over an animal’s life on the farm, during transport, at animal gatherings and at the [slaughter plant], including the manner of death. **Welfare surveillance** ought to be based on valid measures that have been proven to be reliable and feasible to measure. **Welfare assessment** should record both positive and negative experiences of farm animals” (bold emphasis added to show the sequence of concepts).

As we noted last week, the council identifies three levels by which animal welfare can be measured: a life not worth living, a life worth living, and a good life. It is noted in the report that “These definitions of good welfare do not place an explicit moral value on maintaining or extending the lifespan of a farm animal.”

Animals can experience a life not worth living either as the result of disease or injury, or being raised in a production system that “induce[s] severe negative mental states, frustrate[s] normal behavior, preclude[s] positive experiences, [and/or] cause[s] physical debilitation.” The Council goes on to say, “Any farm animal that does not have a life worth living would literally

be better off dead. It should either have its quality of life speedily enhanced, e.g. through veterinary attention or a change in its husbandry, or it should be killed promptly and humanely.” It is expected that meat from animals that do not have a life worth living would not enter into commerce.

For an animal to have a life worth living “the balance of an animal’s experiences must be positive over its lifetime. Any pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm must be necessary, proportionate and minimal, and the system of husbandry and care should provide for the animal’s needs and certain wants....

“Assessment of an animal’s quality of life should cover its welfare throughout its life, up to and including the manner of its death. For example, the welfare of a lamb at the time of castration without anesthesia is poor. However, after a few days of transient pain and discomfort, the animal then might experience a good quality of life until it was killed.

“Transport to market and the [slaughter plant] may again cause a temporary state of poor welfare, but overall the lamb’s life at pasture would provide sufficient positive experiences to suggest that its quality over its lifetime was acceptable. That is, it had a life worth living.”

The authors use the “‘lesser of two evils’... argument...for mutilations.... The harm requires justification and must be outweighed by the good. Thus tail-docking piglets to ‘prop’ up a poor system of husbandry would not be adequate justification. But under certain circumstances, the risk to welfare of not carrying out the mutilation could be greater than that due to the mutilation itself. Farmers and stockmen should review the use of mutilations with the farm’s veterinary surgeon.”

The Council proposes that “full compliance with the law should mean that an animal has a life worth living.” For the Council this is the minimum standard of care that should be provided for meat animals.”

The third level of animal welfare, a good life, means that “their standard of life [is] substantially higher than any legal minimum.... The concept of ‘a good life’ recognizes the distinction that an animal’s quality of life is over and beyond that of a life worth living.”

As the Council explains “good welfare should be a main aim of husbandry with disease controlled by the strictest measures and with minimal preva-

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lence, normal behavior, availability of environmental choices and harmless wants, a ban on most, if not all, mutilations, certain husbandry practices (including the manner of death) proscribed or forbidden, opportunities provided for an animal's comfort, pleasure, interest and confidence, and the highest standards of veterinary care. Above all else, the highest standard of stockmanship has to be provided." This would include "adequate anesthesia and pain relief...for necessary surgical mutilations."

"These classifications of an animal's quality of life," the Council writes, "readily lend themselves to labels that could be applied to livestock products. It should not be necessary to label those products produced in accordance with the law.... Only one label is needed to identify those products from animals that have enjoyed a good life. The label should be protected legally, e.g. for...organic farming."

For meat to be labeled as meeting this standard there needs to be a clear, measurable set of criteria as well as third-party verification that the standards have been met. This "will ensure consumers that they are

buying the kind of products they prefer."

There is a "failure of market mechanisms that would allow the concerned consumer to make an informed choice about the welfare provenance of animal products because of an absence of welfare labeling."

"Globalization of food production and sourcing from suppliers throughout the world mean that it is increasingly difficult for consumers to be confident that animals have been raised under acceptable conditions."

In thinking about production systems and standards of care of farm animals, we need to remember that "conditions which appear to us tolerable today may come to be considered intolerable in the future."

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