

Welfare of intensively kept pigs

In 1994, 20 per cent of the world's 878 million pigs were kept in the European Union (EU). A large proportion of this EU pig population is housed in farms with more than a thousand pigs. Under Article 6 of Council Directive 91/630/EEC, the European Commission (EC) was asked to submit a report to the Council of Europe (C of E) on intensive pig-rearing systems - taking particular account of the welfare of sows reared in various degrees of confinement and in groups, and looking also at the socio-economic implications of different systems of rearing. The Commission asked the Scientific Veterinary Committee (Animal Welfare Section) to report on this, and an expert working group was established under the Chairmanship of Professor P Jensen of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. The resulting report, which is available via the Internet (see below for details), was adopted by the Scientific Veterinary Committee on 30th September 1997.

This 199-page document provides a detailed and thorough review of the subject. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss concepts and measurements of the welfare and the biology and behaviour of pigs under semi-natural conditions. The following two chapters provide an overview of production systems and a review of specific aspects of husbandry and welfare (including flooring and bedding, social structure and mixing, stockmanship, disease prevention and genetic change by conventional breeding and genetic engineering). Chapter 5 compares production systems for each of the stages of the process (service, dry sows, farrowing and lactation, weaning and weaned piglets, and growing and finishing). Chapters 6 and 7 cover the socio-economic aspects of intensive rearing and future research requirements. A summarized list of the 94 conclusions and recommendations is also provided. Finally, there is a full and up-to-date list of references (citing some 750 publications).

The report is well written and well presented and is illustrated with many useful, clear diagrams detailing various housing types and features. At the end of each section there are numbered lists of conclusions and, in bold type, recommendations. These are valuable although, for the most part, not radical.

The chapter on socio-economics makes somewhat gloomy reading. The report estimates that a 1 per cent increase in production costs can decrease income by 30-50 per cent and also states that, '...most consumers are unlikely to be willing to pay more for pig meat that is produced under conditions which they perceive to be better with respect to animal welfare'. It points out that the costs of fattening pigs in some non-EU countries (where welfare standards may be lower than in the EU) is already considerably lower than in Europe - and that putting demands on animal welfare in Europe will place these competitors in an even more favourable position. It is hard to see how this, and other related problems, can be resolved without changes to the current GATT/World Trade Organisation agreements which do not allow the placing of restrictions on importations for animal welfare reasons. However, to end on a brighter note, the report also notes some simple and relatively inexpensive ways in which pig welfare can be improved.

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