

Reports and Comments

Evidence use and farm animal welfare

The Farm Animal Welfare Committee (FAWC) has published a report to advise Government bodies in England, Wales and Scotland on the importance of evidence when making decisions on farm animal welfare. Evidence is considered by FAWC to be: “information that supports or refutes a proposition that is used in decision-making or policy formulation” (1). FAWC originally published a report considering this topic in 2014, the result of a working group set-up in 2012, and entitled ‘Evidence and the Welfare of Farmed Animals. Part 1: The Evidence Base’ (1). ‘Part 2: Evidence Based Decision Making’, complements Part 1 and aims to: “consider and evaluate procedures by which evidence is gathered and used in the policy and decision-making processes associated with aspects of farm animal welfare from national flock/herd to individual animal” (2).

FAWC discusses aspects to be taken into account when considering evidence-based decision-making under the following headings: The purpose of evidence; Establishing the validity and reliability of evidence; The limitations of evidence; Evidence-based approaches within animal welfare practice and policy; and Using evidence in animal welfare policy and practice.

Much of the report focuses on the validity and reliability of evidence. Processes that may increase the likelihood of obtaining quality evidence are highlighted, such as systematic reviews (which are considered to be more reliable, unbiased and transparent than the traditionally used literature review), meta-analyses and greater standardisation of procedures when undertaking and reporting animal-based

research. Looking to the future, Precision Farming is seen as a potentially valuable source of information on animal health and welfare.

When considering the limitations of evidence, FAWC makes the point that as well as ensuring that evidence is of suitable quality, it is also important that policy officials either have sufficient scientific knowledge themselves, or access to relevant advice, to ensure that they understand the evaluation that they are presented with and to enable translation into policy. Additionally, FAWC considers that “Greater clarity is needed on how public and other bodies use evidence in the formulation of policy”. Especially since policy decisions are likely to have an impact on the welfare of millions of animals.

The report ends with six overall conclusions and eighteen recommendations relating to: Evidence definition and purpose; Methods and reliability; Limitations; Current approaches/case studies; Use of evidence; and Framework.

1. Evidence and the Welfare of Farmed Animals. Part 1: The Evidence Base (June 2014). A4, 40 pages. Farm Animal Welfare Committee. Available from the following website: www.defra.gov.uk/fawc, or by contacting FAWC at the following address: FAWC, Area 5E, Nobel House, London SW1 3JR, UK.

2. Evidence and the Welfare of Farmed Animals. Part 2: Evidence-Based Decision Making (June 2018). A4, 33 pages. Farm Animal Welfare Committee. Available from the following website: www.defra.gov.uk/fawc, or by contacting FAWC at the following address: FAWC, Area 5E, Nobel House, London SW1 3JR, UK.

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