

## How can certification schemes promote 'good life' and improve health?

David C. J. Main  
Professor of Animal Welfare  
School of Veterinary Sciences  
University of Bristol  
Langford, Bristol  
BS40 5DU UK

Consumers and retailers of livestock products in many countries are interested in animal welfare. The food industry has responded to this interest in a variety of different ways. For example products can be labelled as adhering to certain assurance or organic scheme standards. Products may also be labelled according to their method of production, such as free range or outdoor-reared. Some products may also use more general higher animal welfare marketing claims, such as "higher welfare" or "welfare friendly". In addition to consumer-focused labels or descriptors, animal welfare criteria can be included alongside other food safety or quality specifications required by retailers. Retailers may include these requirements as part of pro-active Corporate Social Responsibility policies or as part of a defensive strategy to diffuse potential negative media interest. Whilst all these initiatives are essentially market driven some systems such as labelling of eggs and organic standards are supported by European legislative frameworks.

Provided there is an underlying concern for animal welfare amongst consumers, there are many opportunities for market-based initiatives. These market initiatives may or may not be associated with a premium price for the product. For example, many organic products attract some premium although this can vary between different livestock sectors. Differentiation in price is not always obvious to the consumer when retailers or even food service businesses insist the standard product must meet certain welfare criteria.

### Role of certification schemes

Voluntary certification schemes can vary in extent of welfare requirements and in the levels of credibility. Animal welfare focused schemes, such as the RSPCA Freedom Food scheme, go beyond legislation and include requirements such as higher space allowance or access to pasture depending upon the species. In contrast, industry-based schemes such as Red Tractor Assurance, whose membership includes the majority of the industry, are primarily based upon national welfare legislation. Even though standards of these schemes may not be particularly high they can confer genuine benefits where farms are regularly inspected. Accredited schemes also require independent certification, training and monitoring of assessors.

As part of a large collaborative project AssureWel, Bristol has been looking at methods to increase the potential welfare impact of schemes. As part of that work we have developed a set of four best practice principles<sup>1</sup> that should help schemes deliver promotion of positive welfare (good life) and limit harms (minimise poor health outcomes). Firstly the scheme can operate a management system that co-ordinates activities which actively promote improvement in animal welfare within participating farms. This management system should include the following generic steps: plan (establish the objectives including desired outcomes, scheme requirements and monitoring processes), do (implement scheme inspection systems and support structures), check (measure and monitor the process and results) and improve (take action to improve performance). Secondly the scheme should develop progressive resources and outcomes requirements that comply with relevant

Proceedings of AVA Annual Conference, Adelaide, 2016.

Main, D - How can certification schemes promote 'good life' and improve health

legislation, encourage the provision of opportunities / “good life”<sup>2</sup> valued by the animals, promote farm level continuous improvement in important welfare outcomes and require innovation. Thirdly the scheme should target its assessment and support resources on important welfare concerns. Activities should include assessment of relevant welfare requirements and outcomes, promoting interest amongst farmers in their management, ensuring technical advice is available and insisting on remedial action for those farmers with consistent poor outcomes. Finally by taking an evidence-based, participatory and transparent approach the scheme should also embrace external scrutiny and involvement.

As part of the AssureWel project, the RSPCA Freedom Food, Soil Association and Red Tractor have introduced the formal assessment of outcome measures on laying hen, pig and dairy cattle farms to promote improvement amongst their members<sup>3</sup>. The on-going monitoring process has enabled schemes to monitor welfare outcome across each livestock sector including a reduction in feather loss within the laying hen industry<sup>4</sup>.

These principles should help schemes adopt a systematic, scheme level continuous improvement approach, as already used in quality and environmental certification schemes, to promote improvement at a farm level. These principles could also inform the development of an international agreed standard that could facilitate trade in higher animal welfare products.

## References

---

<sup>1</sup> Main DCJ, Mullan S, Atkinson C, et al. Best practice framework for animal welfare certification schemes. *Trends in Food Sci & Tech* 2014;37:127-136

<sup>2</sup> Edgar J, Mullan S, Pritchard J, et al. Towards a ‘Good Life’ for Farm Animals: Development of a Resource Tier Framework to Achieve Positive Welfare for Laying Hens Animals; 2013;3:584-605

<sup>3</sup> Main D, Mullan S, Atkinson C, et al. Welfare outcome assessments in laying hen farm assurance schemes. *Animal Welfare*;2012:21;389-396

<sup>4</sup> Mullan S, Szmargd C, Cooper M, et al. Animal welfare initiatives improve feather cover of non-cage laying hens in the UK. *Animal Welfare*. 2016; In Press.