Consultation: Farm Animal Welfare and Sustainable Livestock Production

The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) is a Non-Departmental Public Body, known as a 'Levy Board', funded by the agriculture and horticulture industries through statutory levies. It was established under the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board Order 2008 and became operational on 1 April 2008.

AHDB is an independent, evidence-based organisation with the duty to improve the efficiency and competitiveness of various agriculture and horticulture sectors in parts of the UK representing about 75% of total UK agricultural output. AHDB serves the six sectors of: Pig meat in England; Beef and lamb in England; Commercial horticulture in Great Britain; Milk in Great Britain; Potatoes in Great Britain; and Cereals and oilseeds in the UK.

Good animal health and welfare is a priority, given expected benefits in quality of life for the individual animal, improved production efficiency, reduced environmental impact and protection of the brand image of livestock farming.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the FAWC consultation on the subject of Farm Animal Welfare and Sustainable Livestock Production.

General questions

1. Where does farm animal welfare sit in the sustainability agenda and why is it important?

AHDB believes that good animal welfare is integral to sustainable meat and dairy production, and although there are risks and challenges, good welfare and sustainable intensification are not mutually exclusive. The British meat and dairy industries are characterised by a diversity of primary production systems, at a range of scales, and this is likely to continue into the future. Within each farm or system, good welfare will remain a
core objective, from an ethical perspective, to underpin production efficiency, retain customer confidence and protect the brand image of farming. The recent roll out of welfare outcome assessments, under Red Tractor Farm Assurance, is a tangible signal of industry intent.

Where welfare sits in the sustainability agenda can be complex, as it involves trade-offs which need to be balanced, can alter over time according to socio-economic trends, and is coloured by the position of individual stakeholders and opinion formers. Good two-way communication, and an evidence-based approach, is essential to a meaningful discussion around how best to incorporate animal welfare into overall sustainability objectives.

It is often unhelpful that good or less desirable welfare, as perceived and judged by society, may be based on intuitive perception rather than scientific measures. For example, within pig farming systems where both indoor and outdoor practices exist there may be a perception that more extensive farming systems provide a preferred welfare outcome albeit in an environmentally less sustainable manner due to less efficient resource utilisation. Food safety is an additional consideration. It is possible for farm livestock production systems to deliver tangible welfare whilst also minimising the risk of zoonoses. However some production systems which are perceived to deliver a more enhanced welfare solution may present additional challenges in terms of minimising the risk of foodborne pathogens.

2. What are the current pressures on agriculture (not just livestock agriculture) that may have impacts on livestock welfare, and how are these likely to change over the next, say, 20 years? These may include pressure for reduced impact on the environment, for increased production, for food security and for financial performance. And they may apply within Great Britain or internationally.

Feeding an expanding human population, in a resource constrained world, will be the major long-term challenge. Alongside this the likely increase in demand for livestock products, at a price which is affordable to consumers in developing, as well as developed nations. A decrease in relative competitiveness, at farm, region or national levels, could constrain the development of welfare friendly systems. Similarly, downward pressures on prices from retailers, to meet consumer demand, could be counterproductive.

Increasing livestock numbers per se is not a sustainable option, particularly given the potential environmental impact of ruminant production. Inevitably there will be greater focus on increasing the ratio of output to each unit of input (feed, water, land, fossil fuel etc.). This means yields are likely to continue to increase, to dilute the overhead carried in animal maintenance. The challenge is to match increases in productivity by parallel improvements in management, husbandry, breeding and nutrition. In some instances, management under more controlled conditions could be the better option, for example precision feeding of high yielding animals.

Market forces and a trend towards economy of scale will encourage continuing increases in herd size, particularly in the dairy and pig sectors. However, scale is not the main factor influencing welfare outcomes, but more how well animals are managed within a given production system. Increased herd sizes and an expansion in fully housed systems may alter the level and balance of risks to good animal. However, it may also bring the
opportunity for more focused, better trained management input, to help mitigate any additional risks.

Beef and lamb production and dairying has the potential to convert non-human edible food (from forage or from fibrous by-product) into high quality, nutritious food suitable for human consumption. Increased pressure for land for cropping as biofuel or directly for human consumption, will mean that alternative production systems will continue to develop, based on the use of by-products. This drive towards greater use of co-products and by-products is also a trend within the British pig sector as it seeks to reduce its reliance on imported Soya.

Climate change, and the likelihood of increasing incidences of extreme events, could impact on animal welfare in both intensive and extensive systems. Production systems will need to adapt, to provide contingency and additional safeguards. Improved design may be required in livestock accommodation, and facilities for storing and handling manures.

Within developed countries there would appear to be increasing resistance from residential communities to be located close to indoor farming systems which are more resource efficient. This not only potentially restricts the ability of some farms to expand production, but can also act as a barrier to existing farms being able to invest in more efficient and environmentally less detrimental technologies.

Other current factors include emerging endemic and exotic disease challenges; differentiated global regulation regarding production systems, animal welfare, and access to technologies such as genetically modified organisms; and non-science based trade protection policies.

3. The various livestock sectors have their own strategies for 2020 and beyond.

   a) What are the current and anticipated future drivers for sustainable livestock production in each sector?
   AHDB believes that the current and anticipated future drivers for beef, sheep and pig sectors in the UK are broadly similar. These are to increase output and enhance product quality whilst using fewer resources within systems that provide livestock with optimal levels of welfare and wellbeing which are acceptable to consumers.

   The driver for sustainable dairy production in Britain is to maintain a profitable and vibrant industry, retaining consumer confidence in the home market, and having the potential to access and compete in a global market. The dairy industry has specific plans to increase milk production to displace the value of imports, and to become a player on global markets. Sustainable production must be underpinned by a level of profitability, which allows for re-investment and the management of systems which are profitable, technically efficient, impact less on the environment and meet the ethical expectations of consumers and society at large. The sector has signed up to national (GB Dairy Road Map) and international initiatives (International Dairy Federation Sustainability Framework) for sustainable production, including animal care.
b) **What are the outcomes anticipated in each sector resulting from these drivers?**
Delivering nutritious meat and dairy products to consumers at an economically acceptable price from production systems which are as ethically and environmentally acceptable as current systems.

In the longer term it is likely there will be fewer, more professionally run businesses, with increasing use of technology and modern production practices deployed across a range of systems (in dairy, from specialist grazing to fully contained systems).

c) **What are the intended or anticipated animal welfare impacts?**
Ensuring all farmed livestock are consistently provided with the five basic freedoms measured in an objective scientific manner.

Systems will need to evolve and adapt with welfare in mind - at very least to protect the current level of animal welfare.

d) **What contributions could animal welfare improvements make to these outcomes?**
Delivery of objective scientific measures to assess the wellbeing of farmed animals may enable more truly sustainable production systems to be developed rather than 'perceived' sustainable solutions promoted by some NGO’s and single issue lobbying groups.

4. **Where the potential impacts on animal welfare are positive, how can the ‘win-win’ benefits be maximised? Are there examples where consideration of animal welfare can identify gains in both welfare and the other priorities identified above that would not otherwise have been found?**

These can be maximised where actual animal welfare and perceived animal welfare are aligned - then there are benefits to the animal, to the producer in terms of enhanced health and potentially lower production costs, the environment through more efficient use of input resources and increased consumer recognition/acceptance resulting in increased demand for products derived from such systems.

Better management and preventive approaches to maintaining health and reducing disease, will lead to wins for the animal, producer, environment and wider society. There are already examples of good practice in the industry which could be used as examples of how these trade-offs can be balanced in practice.

Further work on developing appropriate metrics for sustainability is required, in order to better understand, quantify and exploit opportunities for win:wins. Actual rather than inferred data on the efficiency of resource utilisation from different systems such as life cycle analysis, along with robust economic costings for such systems should be captured. Through using such data sets a more objective, dispassionate assessment of the relative sustainability of differing farm livestock production systems can be achieved, away from
the current paradigm of sustainability too often being defined by different stakeholders depending on the particular lens that is of most interest to them.

5. **Where the potential impacts on animal welfare are negative, how can the best balance be achieved between welfare and other priorities? How can farm animal welfare be best protected within the sustainability agenda?**

An evidence based approach is required to understand the real, rather than perceived, trade-offs between increased productivity and animal welfare. A key element is better understanding of the risks to welfare, and factors likely to compromise an animal having a ‘good life’. These trade-offs must be dealt with objectively, rather than on the basis of perception.

In the end Societies will need to determine if a detrimental welfare impact is acceptable relative to the other priorities such as environmental or economic burdens and sustainability. This will be expressed through the purchasing behaviours of informed shoppers.

There is also a strong role for knowledge exchange to promote good practice and to develop innovative solutions to some of the constraints. Legislative routes are likely to be ineffective, and without an adequate evidence base, could be ill-judged.

6. **How could/should considerations for animal welfare influence the design of systems for sustainable agriculture?**

An integrated approach is required, incorporating robust scientific measures for good animal welfare.

This revolves around the use of suitable genetics, in an animal-centric environment optimised for the particular system of production, with the appropriate level and quality of management applied.

It is important to recognise that different systems may pose different risks, as well as opportunities, for preserving or enhancing animal welfare. Understanding these risks and opportunities is fundamental to ensuring than the correct management systems and mitigating measures are in place.

Assessment of farm animal welfare must be via robust and creditable scientific protocols and objective standards such as Welfare Outcomes and not reduced to simplistic assumptions or perceptions such as size/scale of production and indoor versus outdoor farming systems.

Skilled staff, professional husbandry or veterinary advice, use of appropriate management systems and standard operating procedures will have a major impact.

Increasingly there will be the opportunity to use new and emerging technologies as decision support tools, with potential to monitor or predict changes in environment or in animal health status.
Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this consultation.

Yours sincerely,

Guy Attenborough
Director of Communications & Legal Services