A pilot investigation of possible positive system descriptors in finishing pigs

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Abstract

In this study, pig producers were identified whose practices exceeded the basic legal requirements and government recommendations for pig welfare. This novel approach was part of a larger project investigating the feasibility and benefits of the inclusion of some animal-based welfare outcome measures into the main UK pig farm assurance schemes. A set of pig-keeping-system descriptor scores were devised through consultation with stakeholders, whereby a finishing pig-farm would be classified on a scale of 1 (legislation compliance) to 5 (highest level of welfare provision) for six different elements of pig husbandry which can influence pig welfare (environmental enrichment, foraging behaviour, thermal comfort, physical comfort, tail docking and floor space provision). Animal-based observations were used to assess the welfare of a sample of between 67 and 220 pigs on 15 UK finishing pig farms, which were also classified according to the system descriptors. Scores achieved when assessing the environmental enrichment and physical comfort elements were significantly positively correlated with a qualitative assessment of good mood of the pigs and a measure of their oral manipulation and significantly negatively correlated with the prevalence of tail lesions and swollen bursae. However, there were wide variations in the prevalence of animal-based welfare outcome measures between farms with the same system descriptor score. These system descriptors are therefore not sufficient to be used alone to provide assurances on welfare. It is suggested that a combined approach of system descriptors and animal-based welfare outcome measures may be useful for providing assurances on higher levels of welfare.

Keywords: animal welfare, farm assurance, farming system, husbandry, pig, welfare outcomes

Introduction

This study was part of a project examining the feasibility and benefits of including some welfare outcome assessments in UK pig-farm assurance (FA) schemes. Systems for assessing farm animal welfare to provide marketplace assurances have developed along different lines. Current UK pig-farm assurance standards are typically based on the legislative requirements and government recommendations for some of the factors that affect an animal’s welfare, such as housing, feed and stocking density. However, it is less easy to define standards for other inputs, such as genetic make-up and stockmanship (ABP 2007; GQA 2007).

The ‘Animal Needs Index’ (ANI) (Bartussek 1999) is one system which aims to provide a means to regulate and promote the welfare of farm animals through providing a “simple, unequivocal and easily applicable” set of formal welfare assurance standards. It assesses the resources provided to animals in five categories: the possibility of mobility, social contact, the condition of the flooring for lying, standing and walking, the ambient climate and the quality of the human care. Points are awarded for the level of resource provision within the species-specific criteria of each category and compensation can occur between criteria. A different approach to farm assurance is to require farms to incorporate a Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) approach to try to reduce the likelihood of problems arising. This system is proposed to ensure food safety in particular (Hochner et al 2006) but can also be part of a welfare assurance programme (Kyriakis et al 2000; Noordhuizen & Metz 2005; von Borell et al 2007). Importantly, there is an emphasis within the HACCP framework on identifying areas where the risk of a hazard, such as a welfare problem, can be reduced. This encourages gradual improvement in procedures to reduce the risk of hazards occurring.

There are increasing calls for the farm animal welfare assurances provided by FA schemes to be improved. A report analysing the most common UK FA schemes by the Compassion in World Farming Trust concluded that the schemes provided poor levels of welfare assurance, as they permitted intensive farming situations that contravened their own 15 resource-based key welfare determinants (Lymbery 2002). The UK Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) also recognised the limitations of current welfare assurance systems. One suggestion they made to improve