A scenario analysis on the implementation of a farm animal welfare assessment system

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Abstract

There have been important developments in the measurement of farm animal welfare in recent years. Measuring animal welfare is one thing, implementing a farm animal welfare assessment system another. The implementation of such a system occurs in an environment that is influenced by economic, political, technological and socio-cultural factors which interact with each other. This creates enormous complexity, generates a huge number of different potential ‘futures’, and makes the eventual impact that the system will have on the welfare of farm animals uncertain. This article draws upon strategic management literature to apply scenario analysis as a technique to help understand the variance of the uncertainty associated with the implementation of an animal welfare assessment scheme. Specifically, it develops two extreme scenarios based on a theoretical European-wide implementation: one scenario in which all uncertain factors influence the implementation of the assessment system in a negative way, and one scenario in which all these factors have positive impacts. These scenarios provide insight into the variance of possible futures in which the system may have to function. Although consumers are an important stakeholder group, their role in creating uncertainty for the system may be overestimated; it is apparent that the roles of companies, brands and certification organisations deserve significant attention, as well as any relevant institutional structure.

Keywords: animal welfare, certification, farm animal welfare assessment, implementation, policy, scenario analysis

Introduction

Since the Second World War, major changes have taken place in animal production. Farming has become increasingly industrialised with intensification of production, new technologies being introduced to farmers, farms becoming highly specialised and significant increases in production and the number of animals per farm (cf Blokhuis 1998; Porcher 2001). During more recent years, the awareness of the general public for animal welfare and farming issues has grown and been affected by factors such as the activity of animal interest groups, as well as by media attention of animal health crises such as swine fever, BSE, and foot-and-mouth disease. In order to accommodate societal concerns about animal welfare issues, interest in animal food products — as well as related market demands — Government and academic research attention has focused on the development of reliable, science-based, on-farm systems for assessing animals’ welfare status (cf Blokhuis et al 2003). In recent years, major steps have been made in the measurement of animal welfare (Bracke et al 2001; Blokhuis et al 2008) and assessment systems have been developed for several species of farm animals (Keeling 2009; Welfare Quality® 2009a,b,c; Blokhuis et al 2010).

Whereas developing an animal welfare assessment system is one thing, implementing these in production chains and marketing them in a way that connects farmers to processors, retailers and consumers as well as to the other stakeholders which affect the assessment system (for example governments and special interest groups) is another. In the implementation of animal welfare assessment systems, policy-makers consider (amongst other factors) the attitudes and economics of farmers (Den Ouden et al 1997; Borrett et al 2003), the perceptions of consumers (Bennett 1997; Bennett et al 2002; Frewer et al 2005), the role of certification bodies (Hatanaka et al 2005) and standard-formulating organisations (Ingenbleek et al 2007), the strategies of food companies and brands (Adams 2008), and structural developments in macro-economic and political environments such as international trade issues (Hobbs et al 2002). These factors do not combine in any simple way that can be easily ‘managed’, as interactions between all these factors lead to a huge number of potential future directions. Each of these different ‘futures’ will require a different type of support for the implementation of the assessment system.

This article aims to explore these potential futures by applying scenario analysis. Scenario analysis is a technique