Welfare outcomes assessment in laying hen farm assurance schemes

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Abstract

Most farm assurance schemes in the UK at least, in part, aim to provide assurances to consumers and retailers of compliance with welfare standards. Inclusion of welfare outcome assessments into the relevant inspection procedures provides a mechanism to improve animal welfare within assurance schemes. In this study, taking laying hens as an example, we describe a process for dealing with the practical difficulties in achieving this in two UK schemes; Freedom Food and Soil Association. The key challenges arise from selecting the most appropriate measures, defining sampling strategies that are feasible and robust, ensuring assessors can deliver a consistent evaluation and establishing a mechanism to achieve positive change. After a consultation exercise and pilot study, five measures (feather cover, cleanliness, aggressive behaviour, management of sick or injured birds, and beak trimming) were included within the inspection procedures of the schemes. The chosen sampling strategy of assessing 50 birds without handling provided reasonable certainty at a scheme level but less certainty at an individual farm level. Despite the inherent limitations within a time and cost sensitive certification assessment, the approach adopted does provide a foundation for welfare improvement by being able to highlight areas of concern requiring attention, enabling schemes to promote the use of outcome scoring as a management tool, promoting the dissemination of relevant technical information in a timely manner and increasing the scrutiny of standards important for the welfare of the birds.

Keywords: animal welfare, farm assurance, feather loss, laying hen, sampling, welfare outcomes

Introduction

In general, farm assurance schemes aim to provide assurances to the consumer and the foodchain on compliance with food safety, animal welfare and environmental standards. These private standards are usually developed by reference to existing legislation, codes of practice, scientific knowledge and practical experience. Farm assurance standards or marketplace requirements have been primarily focused on resource (engineering) rather than outcome (performance) standards (Mench 2003; Webster 2009). However, the increased inclusion of welfare outcomes within farm assurance schemes has previously been advocated by the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC 2005). The Farm Animal Welfare Forum (2010) has also advocated that welfare outcome ‘safeguards’ be used to provide evidence about the ‘welfare credentials’ of production system labelling.

A collaborative project (AssureWel) between the University of Bristol, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and Soil Association aimed to introduce a formalised and structured approach to including welfare outcomes into the inspection procedures of the Freedom Food and Soil Association Certification schemes, initially focusing on laying hens. The Freedom Food scheme, which is owned by the RSPCA, has over 1,000 members with laying hen farms and accounts for approximately 99% of the non-cage and approximately 50% of the total egg production in the UK (RSPCA, personal communication 2011). The Soil Association scheme which also incorporates the relevant organic regulation (European Community 2007, 2008) has over 250 members with laying hen farms. Although both schemes specify many detailed resource requirements, the use of welfare outcomes has not yet been fully developed in a structured and formalised way to its full potential. For example, both schemes’ standards make reference to feather loss, a welfare outcome measure. An assurance assessor verifying compliance with this standard would need to evaluate, even if only informally, the level of feather loss to determine whether a behavioural problem had occurred. However, it is recognised that assessment could be improved with a more scientifically robust methodology. Previous research investigations (Green et al 2000; Bestman & Wagenaar 2003; Whay et al 2007; Lambton et al 2010) have shown significant variability in the levels of injurious pecking in UK n-caged hens. For schemes to be able to...