Economic, education, encouragement and enforcement influences within farm assurance schemes

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Abstract

Farm assurance schemes are voluntary certification schemes that aim to provide consumers and retailers with assurances on animal welfare, environment and food safety standards. Whilst current schemes have often been focused on resource-based standards there has been interest in schemes including more outcome-based assessments. In order to maximise the likely impact of including these outcome assessments it is important to consider the economic, education, encouragement and enforcement drivers that may improve welfare. Using dairy cattle lameness as an example, the potential mechanisms to use these drivers within farm assurance schemes is reviewed. Future development of schemes should focus on encouraging the active participation of farmers in monitoring and managing outcome measures. Economic and educational approaches have a role in supporting change. Where possible, economic drivers need to be working in the same direction as welfare (ie provide win-win situations). Educational initiatives, such as providing generic technical information and farm-specific advisory support, need to be available when requested. Finally, enforcement tools, based on existing non-compliance procedures, may be needed to stimulate activity if other initiatives prove ineffective on individual farms.

Keywords: animal welfare, economic, education, encouragement, enforcement, farm assurance

Introduction

Farm assurance has become an integral part of livestock production in the UK and many other countries (Rushen et al 2011). Animal welfare has been included alongside food safety and environmental concerns within the scope of all the assurance schemes the UK. Whilst membership of these certification schemes is voluntary, they are often unavoidable for producers wishing to market their products to the major retailers. The Farm Animal Welfare Council (2005) commented that assurance schemes have “a major role in ensuring acceptable standards of farm animal welfare”. However, it is less clear if assurance schemes have the potential to improve welfare. Schemes in the UK are normally accredited by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service to be compliant with the EU accreditation standard EN45011. This provides a certain level of credibility with respect to independence, impartiality and competence. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that where specific resource requirements, such as increased space allowance or access to pasture, are included within the scheme then these will be provided to the animals. Furthermore, a recent study has demonstrated a higher compliance with legal requirements amongst assured compared to non-assured farms (KilBride et al 2011). Earlier work reported that dairy cattle on farms that were members of the UK Freedom Food scheme operating to welfare standards defined by the RSPCA, scored better on some, but not all, welfare measures when compared with dairy cattle on farms outside the scheme (Main et al 2003).

In this article, we suggest that there are likely to be four broad categories of initiatives that may promote welfare improvement: economic, education, encouragement and enforcement. Economic drivers have long been recognised as important for farmer decision-making. There is some evidence that financial-incentive-based interventions may be effective in the dairy industry. For example, in Canada (and other countries) the penalties and incentives associated with cell counts measured in the milk have been associated with a considerable reduction in mastitis incidence (Dekkers et al 1996). However, there is also evidence that farmers do not always follow advice based on sound financial information. For example, sub-optimal economic behaviour towards mastitis management has been demonstrated in Dutch farmers (Huijps et al 2010). Education, similarly, has been seen as an important driver for improvement. Although interventions based solely on filling specific ‘knowledge deficits’ are unlikely to be effective especially if they do not take into account the context of the specific farm (Kristensen & Jakobsen 2011). Another important driver is to the value of encouragement-based