The use of a single empirical outcome measure to assess welfare in slaughter plants: between- and within-sector comparisons of the supply base for a major retail multiple

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Abstract

The objective of the present retrospective analysis was to review between- and within-sector variations in an outcome-based measure of animal welfare throughout slaughterhouses that currently supply to Tesco Stores Ltd, UK. Non-conformances in relation to individual scheme standards were designated a specific level in terms of severity and frequency and from this a single outcome status, based on a ‘traffic-light’ system is assigned to the site (which informs both subsequent corrective action and future inspection frequency). Sector-specific, country and time differences were found and underlying contributory factors and associated commercial implications are reviewed.

Keywords: animal welfare, assessment protocol, outcome measures, quality assurance, slaughterhouse, Tesco Stores Ltd

Introduction

Driven by demands of increasing consumer awareness and an EU-wide concern about farm animal welfare (Special Eurobarometer 229 2005), major multi-national retailers have sought to provide assurances in respect of general ‘ethical accountability’ and overall product quality. To date, this has been achieved through stipulating supplier compliance with individual accredited assurance schemes and/or retailer-specific regimens. However, the associated methods adopted by retailers are arguably of particular focus (FAWC 2005). As a perceived ‘dominant force’, the consequent buying power of major multiples means that they can potentially apply what may be felt to be a disproportionate effect on food standards’ issues, including animal welfare, replacing or duplicating existing schemes and implementing requirements or adherence time-scales in excess of national legislation. For the retailer these requirements are necessarily placed within a framework of economic considerations and a need to ensure brand protection; not least because it has been demonstrated that consumers rely heavily on brands or store names that they recognise and trust to help lower time engaged in decision-making, so-called ‘search costs’ (Rao & Ruekert 1994). Thus, credence attributes, such as animal welfare, may become linked with a broader brand recognition/quality attribute in terms of influencing final consumer purchasing decisions (Ingenbleek & Immink 2011). The overall situation is further complicated by a lack of consensus in terms of what constitutes ‘animal welfare’ and how it can best be assessed effectively and mindful of both practical and scientific considerations (Broom 1991; Vanhonaker et al 2008).

Tesco Stores Ltd, UK, has historically adopted a two-fold approach to their own branded products in the agriculture (animal products) sector. In the first instance, all suppliers must be audited under the appropriate sector-specific quality assurance scheme, compliant with ISO/IEC guide 65: 1996/BSEN 45011: 1998. However, given that within an international supply base there are inevitably variations in individual scheme requirements all producers work to overarching sector-specific retailer requirements. Consistency of this secondary inspection process has been achieved for the previous thirteen years through the use of Integra Food Secure Ltd, an independent UKAS (United Kingdom Accreditation Service) accredited body whose inspectors are deployed globally throughout the Tesco supply base for the UK market.

The use of such an approach could be criticised for an apparent duplication of effort but it does serve an additional sampling function in terms of determining the extent to which the implementation of national assurance scheme standards are audited in a consistent and reproducible manner, given recent findings in relation to individual assessors and issues of judgement, negotiation and subsequent record (Roe et al 2011).