Farm membership of voluntary welfare schemes results in better compliance with animal welfare legislation in Great Britain

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Abstract

The Action Plan of the European Commission 2006–2010 proposed a move towards more private and less state regulation of animal welfare and Great British (GB) Governments made a commitment to reduce the burden of inspection of farms by targeting high-risk enterprises. In previous research in GB, farmers in private, voluntary regulated schemes were more compliant with GB legislation and code at statutory welfare inspections made by the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) than farmers not in such schemes. The current study investigated whether membership of other private voluntary regulators and national data sources were associated with greater compliance with welfare at APHA inspections and whether the previous association between greater compliance and membership of private schemes persisted. Compliance at APHA inspections remained higher on farms in the private schemes previously investigated. It was also higher in the one retailer and seven herd health schemes investigated. There was no association between non-welfare EU cross-compliance inspections and compliance at APHA inspections. Approximately 90% of farmers in a scheme passed welfare inspections compared with 80% of non-scheme members. We conclude that farms in private schemes are more likely to pass APHA inspections and so this criterion can be used in selection of farms for risk-based inspection. We hypothesise that private regulation with regular inspection of all farms could raise compliance with animal welfare legislation to at least the minimum legal standards, however, it could result in animals with low welfare being concealed; consequently, this hypothesis requires testing.

Keywords: animal welfare, farm animals, government legislation, herd health scheme, inspections, private regulation

Introduction

In the European Union, the welfare of farmed animals is regulated by legislation at EU and region levels (Lundmark et al 2014). In Great Britain, the welfare of farm animals is legislated by the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (and Animal Health and Welfare [Scotland] Act 2006), supplemented in England, Scotland and Wales by The Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (with amendments) and codes. The Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA, formerly AHVLA) carries out animal welfare inspections in GB on behalf of English, Scottish and Welsh Governments and in compliance with the EU, to investigate compliance with animal legislation and code. Approximately 2,000 farms (1%) are inspected per annum. The reasons for inspection vary and include, for example, targeted inspections (eg after stocking a farm), because of a complaint from the public, where there was a previous non-compliant inspection and random inspections (Table 1). Those that fail inspections can be prosecuted or given time to rectify an infringement.

A proportion of farmers (claimants) receive payments from the rural payment schemes in GB because of compliance with statutory management requirements (SMR) and good agricultural and environmental conditions (GAEC). Payment for these schemes comes via the EU and since 2007 the EU has required that 1% of claimants under these schemes are inspected to monitor cross-compliance (Defra 2015). Claimants that breach regulations have reduced payments, and may also be prosecuted.

In many countries, farm animal welfare is partly privately regulated by voluntary schemes where members have to adhere to standards to retain membership. These are typically farm assurance and organic certification schemes, for example: Red Tractor, Neuland, Global Gap, Ecocert and The Soil Association (Bock & Huik 2007; Lundmark et al 2014). In GB, all farms within such a scheme are inspected regularly, typically annually, and by an independent certification body to ensure that members comply with scheme standards. Some farms are also in a retailer scheme. The standards are typically not published and auditing of these schemes is internal to the company.

The Action Plan of the European Commission 2006–2010 has proposed a vision of a move towards more private and less state regulation of animal welfare (Lundmark et al 2014). In GB, there is evidence that compliance with animal welfare legislation, as assessed by APHA inspection, was almost two-fold higher on farms regulated by private assurance schemes or organic certification standards with