Willingness of Dutch broiler and pig farmers to convert to production systems with improved welfare

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Abstract

The present study investigated 15 broiler and 13 fattening pig farmers’ willingness-to-convert to alternative production systems with higher animal welfare standards compared to conventional production systems in The Netherlands, and explored the main barriers to the adoption of these alternative systems. Alternative production systems were categorised, according to whether farmers were required to make reversible or irreversible changes to the current farm. Two out of the four pig systems in the study were considered as reversible, whereas the other two as irreversible. One out of the four broiler systems presented was considered as reversible, whereas the other three as irreversible. Results show that to convert to a system requiring irreversible changes 83 and 85% (figures for each of the two irreversible systems) of the surveyed fattening pig farmers required a 30% or higher increase in their family income, while to convert to a system requiring reversible changes 8 and 23% of the pig farmers required a similar level of increase. Also, for each of the three irreversible systems, 62, 64 and 87% of the surveyed broiler farmers required a 30% or higher increase in their family income to a system requiring irreversible changes, while to convert to a system requiring reversible changes, 20% of the broiler farmers required a similar level of increase. Thirty-eight and 62% of the fattening pig farmers and 40% of the broiler farmers were willing to convert to the specific systems that allowed reversible changes if they knew they could earn the same income as they did in their current system. This study highlights a number of reasons for farmers’ reluctance to switch to alternative systems: perceived uncertainty about price premiums, lack of space on the farm, scarcity of land nearby the farm, risk of disease spread, the existing farm set-up, prohibition of tail docking, allowing for castration, and views that proposed alternatives were ‘farmer-unfriendly’ or impractical.

Keywords: animal welfare, barriers to adoption, broiler production, contingent valuation, farmers’ decision-making, pig production

Introduction

Dutch broiler and pig farmers in The Netherlands can choose voluntarily from a range of production systems, which comply with animal welfare (AW) standards that exceed the legislative minimum standards (Immink et al 2013; Vanhonacker & Verbeke 2014). A farmer’s decision to adopt a new production system is affected by the farmer’s intrinsic motivation to produce according to higher AW standards and by the choice set that is determined by external factors and certain farm-specific factors. Gocsik (2014) found that farmers did not have a strong intrinsic motivation to convert to a production system with higher AW standards. This study also suggested that farmers’ intrinsic motivation was constrained by external factors that were beyond the farmers’ control and by farm-specific factors such as farm size and farm set-up. Hence, the farmers’ default choice is often a conventional production system. Nevertheless, it is likely that farmers would be willing to adopt higher AW standards if external and farm-specific factors are favourable for the adoption (Gocsik 2014).

The literature on farmers’ decisions to adopt new production systems and other investments also shows that the choice of production system is influenced by external factors that are out with the farmers’ control, such as the legislative environment and market forces, and by farm-specific factors such as farm set-up and farm size (Greiner & Gregg 2011). De Lauwere et al (2012) suggest that external factors, such as credit availability and permit procedures, are possible bottlenecks in changing to group housing for pregnant sows. Uncertainty about future legislation may also influence farmers’ decisions about production practices (Tuylten et al 2008; De Lauwere et al 2012). Furthermore, Gocsik (2014) found that land availability and price premiums also affect farmers’ decisions to adopt production systems that improve AW. Previous studies also identified socio-economic and demographic factors associated with farms and farmers as relevant to the adoption decision (De Buck et al 2001; Oude Lansink et al 2003; Gocsik et al 2014). However, these factors are of less importance when designing market initiatives, as socio-economic and demographic factors are relatively fixed and difficult to influence. In contrast, external factors, such as market conditions are more flexible to changes. Therefore, exploring