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The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead,
Hertfordshire AL4 8AN, UK
www.ufaw.org.uk

Animal Welfare 2018, 27: 275-286
ISSN 0962-7286
doi: 10.7120/09627286.27.3.275

Assessing the welfare level of intensive fattening pig farms in Germany with the Welfare Quality[®] protocol: does farm size matter?

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Abstract

The housing condition of pig (*Sus scrofa*) fattening farms are increasingly receiving criticism, because they are associated with impaired animal welfare. Consumers view the increase in farm sizes critically, even though scientifically based knowledge on the relationship between farm size and welfare is still limited. Therefore, the aim of this study was to assess the welfare level of conventional fattening pig farms in Germany and to evaluate the relationship between farm size and animal welfare level. In total, the Welfare Quality[®] protocol (WQ) for pigs was applied on 60 farms. Farms were classified according to their size into small (< 1,500 pigs per farm), medium (1,500–3,000 pigs per farm) and large (> 3,000 pigs per farm). Independent of the farm size, the overall WQ classifications ‘excellent’ and ‘not classified’ were not recorded in any of the farms, while ‘enhanced’ and ‘acceptable’ was achieved by 80 and 20% of the farms, respectively. Farm sizes had no effect on any of the four principles ‘good feeding’, ‘good housing’, ‘good health’ or ‘appropriate behaviour’. Overall, moderate bursitis (35%) was found to be the most prevalent indicator of welfare-related problems. However, it did not differ between farm sizes. Another highly prevalent indicator, moderately soiled body, increased from 11.1% in small- to 20.8% in large-sized farms. In conclusion, our findings show that none of the farm sizes were superior in terms of animal welfare. Overall, acceptable or enhanced scores were achieved for many of the criteria, however the need for improvement in other criteria such as ‘expression of other behaviour’ and ‘positive emotional state’, was clear.

Keywords: animal-based indicators, animal welfare, farm size, fattening pigs, housing systems, Welfare Quality[®] assessment protocol