Protecting farm animal welfare during intensification: Farmer perceptions of economic and regulatory pressures

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Abstract

Pig (Sus scrofa) production in Hungary provides a case study in how external pressures influence animal production, animal welfare and intensification. External pressures were explored in 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Hungarian pig farmers operating either confinement or alternative systems. Confinement producers reported intense economic pressure because of a power imbalance with the large meat-processing companies that buy their animals. These companies, in the view of the farmers, can source internationally and largely dictate prices. When prices paid by the companies fall below the cost of production, farmers cannot respond by reducing production because of the long time-lags between breeding and marketing; and with their large investment in confinement buildings that are difficult to modify, farmers see little option except to reduce production costs further. Alternative farmers reported being more resilient to economic pressures because they sell into niche markets, use inexpensive technologies, and typically produce a diversity of agricultural products which buffer periods of low profit in any one commodity. The current regulatory system was seen as inadequate to protect animal welfare from economic pressure because it focuses on certain inputs rather than welfare outcomes, does not cover some important determinants of animal welfare, and does not accommodate certain realities of farming. Current subsidies were also seen as an inadequate remedy, and were viewed as inequitable because they are difficult for alternative producers to access. Consumer-choice options, while used by alternative producers, are not available in mainstream markets which demand uniform ‘commodity’ production. The economic constraints that influence animal welfare might be better mitigated by a regulatory system developed with greater consultation with producers, a more equitable subsidy programme, and more developed consumer-choice programmes.

Keywords: animal welfare, economics, intensification, pigs, regulation, subsidies

Introduction

Since Harrison (1964) first drew attention to the animal welfare problems of confinement animal agriculture, a great deal of change has occurred (Miele et al 2005; Blokhuis et al 2010). Welfare problems have been identified and debated, scientific methods have been developed and refined (Broom 1991; Webster 2005), and animal advocacy has been widely engaged in creating public awareness and influencing legislation. However, significant debates over farm animal welfare continue, and these have led to competing discourses (Stibbe 2005) and ethical frameworks (Fraser 2008) to understand the problem and propose solutions.

There is wide agreement that complex, interconnected factors affect farm animal welfare (Fraser 2008; 2014; Anderson 2011), but research on these factors has been limited. Studies to date have focused predominantly on understanding the conflicting norms of farmers and the non-producing public (Miele & Bock 2007), the inconsistencies between societal principles and consumer purchasing behaviour (European Commission 2016), and possible drivers of change through willingness-to-pay studies (Glass et al 2005).

However, in deciding on their animal management practices, farmers are highly constrained by external factors (Thompson 2001; Hendrickson & James 2005) that have received too little attention in animal welfare research. One is legislation which on the surface requires certain practices to be followed, although the actual effects of legislation on animal welfare have been little studied. Second are the economic constraints created by the marketplace, especially as there is often a power imbalance when many farmers must compete to sell products to a small number of processing companies. Third are subsidy programmes which are designed to compensate for the higher costs of good welfare practices but may have more complex effects.

The present study was designed to understand the perceptions of animal producers of these external pressures and how they influence farming operations and animal welfare.