

© 2020 Universities Federation for Animal Welfare
The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead,
Hertfordshire AL4 8AN, UK
www.ufaw.org.uk

Animal Welfare 2020, 29: 133-141
ISSN 0962-7286
doi: 10.7120/09627286.29.2.133

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

M Molnár*[†] and D Fraser[‡]

[†] Department of Environmental Sciences and Policy, Central European University, 1051 Budapest Nádor Utca 9, Hungary

[‡] Animal Welfare Program, Faculty of Land and Food Systems, 2357 Main Mall, University of British Columbia, Vancouver BC, Canada V6T 1Z4

* Contact for correspondence: mariann.zs.molnar@gmail.com

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