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www.ufaw.org.uk

Animal Welfare 2021, 30: 121-129
ISSN 0962-7286
doi: 10.7120/09627286.30.2.121

Animal welfare during a period of intensification: The views of confinement and alternative pig producers

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Abstract

In Hungary, where intensive and non-intensive pig production co-exist, in-depth interviews were used to explore the views and priorities of pig producers regarding animal welfare and ethical animal production. Farmers using confinement systems and those with alternative, non-confinement systems shared certain core values such as attachment to animals and to traditional community values. Both groups agreed on most key elements of animal welfare (health, nutrition, etc) but had different priorities for how to achieve these within their production systems. Alternative producers considered unconfined, semi-natural environments important for animal welfare, and confinement producers with medium-sized operations (400–600 sows) generally agreed. Only the three largest producers (> 1,000 sows) expressed strong confidence in confinement methods. Different producers emphasised different features for ensuring animal welfare. Producers with large-scale confinement systems depend strongly on staff and automation and require the means to find and retain good staff. Those with medium-scale confinement systems see automation and personal involvement with animals as crucial, and they need economic conditions that allow herd size to remain within their personal capacity. Those operating alternative systems see small herds and non-confinement systems as crucial for animal welfare and need markets that encourage such systems. Subsidies, regulatory systems and technological developments would need to be tailored to meet the different needs in order for producers to improve animal welfare in the different systems and according to their own values and priorities. Medium-scale confinement producers could better act on their values if economic conditions allowed them to use more natural systems.

Keywords: animal welfare, confinement, ethics, intensification, pig, values