Finnish cattle and pig farmers' perceptions of animal welfare inspections

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to broaden the understanding of Finnish cattle and pig farmers' perceptions of the on-site animal welfare inspections carried out by official authorities in livestock farms. The study was conducted using an electronic questionnaire, aimed at 500 Finnish cattle and 500 pig farmers. Responses were received from 96 cattle farmers and 105 pig farmers, of which 20 and 55, respectively, had undergone an animal welfare inspection. It was found that most of the farmers recognised the need for animal welfare inspections, but also that a more negative attitude was prevalent among farmers who had undergone these inspections. The inspection itself was far more negative experience if the farmer had not understood the reason for the inspection, no opportunity existed to be heard, or the findings of the report were found to be unclear. The results suggest that although the farmers generally approve of inspections, their own negative experiences affect their perceptions. Moving forward, efforts should be made by inspectors to enhance the level of communication, thereby ensuring the findings of the report are clear to the farmer.

Keywords: animal welfare, cattle, farmers' perceptions, livestock farmer, on-farm inspections, pigs

Introduction

The protection of animals kept for farming purposes in the EU is based on a specific directive (Council Directive 98/58/EC 1998). The standards for calves and pigs are also supplemented by species-specific directives (Council Directive 2008/119/EC 2008a; Council Directive 2008/120/EC 2008b). The directives lay down the minimum standards for the protection of animals and every EU Member State (MS) is obliged to transpose these directives into national law. Furthermore, an EC Regulation (Regulation [EC] No 882/2004 2004) stipulates that official on-farm inspections should be carried out by competent authorities to verify that the minimum standards of the above-mentioned directives are complied with. According to the same regulation, these inspections should be made without prior warning, regularly, on a risk basis, and with appropriate frequency.

Official animal welfare control is an important part of ensuring animal welfare on farms. However, official authorities may require no more than the minimum standards laid down in legislation. Anneberg et al (2013) have discussed the dilemma regarding whether inspectors should only focus on verifying the compliance with legislation or whether inspections should also contain a preventive aspect. A confrontation may arise if the farmer sees animal welfare differently to the inspector, who looks at the issue from a legislative perspective (Sørensen & Fraser 2010).

The Finnish animal welfare control system was changed at the end of 2009 when new official veterinarian posts were created for animal welfare control. This change was due to an existing conflict of interest; the same official veterinarians who were responsible for the veterinary care of the animals also carried out inspections on the same premises, ie on their clients. Another aim of the change was to increase resources for animal welfare control. In Finland, the animal welfare inspections are mainly based on suspicion of non-compliance but also on sampling (approximately 2% of cattle and 3% of pig farms) and on the control of cross-compliances (Evira 2016). In cases of minor non-compliance, eg slightly dirty drinking water, guidance on corrections and promoting animal welfare is given. If the guidance given is found to be ineffective or if the non-compliances are serious, eg animals are suffering from thirst, appropriate enforcement measures are taken to ensure correction. An animal owner may be given a prohibition for continuing or repeating an illegal procedure or an order to fulfil obligations within a specific time-period. If required for animal protection reasons, official authorities may also take immediate action to ensure the welfare of an animal, eg feed or other substances may be acquired from