



INTRODUCTION FARM ANIMAL INDICATORS

Safeguarding the welfare of all animals reared for food in the UK every year poses enormous challenges. The sheer number of animals involved – more than 900 million annually – and the varying and often complex physical and behavioural needs of the various farmed species contribute to those challenges. Proper understanding of species-specific needs, and ‘translation’ of that knowledge into appropriate farming practices, is essential if animals are to be provided with a good quality of life. Similarly, knowledge of current farming practices and their effect on welfare, and of ‘trends’ in levels of key welfare problems is necessary if efforts to improve livestock well-being are to be appropriately focused and effective. The need for reliable, objective, national data on key welfare-related issues is, therefore, self evident. Difficulties encountered by the RSPCA in finding such data when compiling the following section of this report underlines the continuing need – acknowledged in the government’s Animal Health and Welfare Strategy¹ – to ensure that greater efforts are made to achieve this.

During 2008, several significant events occurred in the area of farm animal welfare.

- The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) issued a report on lamb castration and tail docking². The RSPCA had submitted its views to the FAWC during the consultation process. Where appropriate, the RSPCA will be urging sheep producers to adopt the recommendations, some of which are also being used to help inform further development of our own welfare standards for sheep.
- Bristol University welfare scientists started work on an RSPCA-funded project aimed at finding ways of encouraging increased use of the outdoor range by laying hens in free-range systems³.
- The RSPCA launched its meat chicken welfare campaign in January with a letter to all British supermarkets, published in the national press, challenging them to commit to only selling higher welfare chicken by 2010. The public were also asked to sign a petition to support the challenge.

The campaigning was planned to coincide with TV programmes on chicken production and welfare, hosted by celebrity chefs Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, for which the RSPCA provided much scientific and technical advice and information.

- The Society launched a legal challenge to new regulations enabling the use of ‘ventilation shutdown’ (VS) – which permits turning off the ventilation system in poultry buildings – as a method to kill poultry in the event of a disease outbreak, such as avian influenza. The RSPCA opposed VS as it results in birds being left to die through hyperthermia, starvation, dehydration, lack of oxygen and/or of disease. Although the Society’s challenge failed, it did prompt Defra to set additional conditions on VS use and produce guidelines on how to try to reduce duration of suffering prior to death.
- There were a number of governmental and other consultations on various farm animal welfare issues in 2008, to which the RSPCA submitted responses. Areas addressed included pig mutilations and environmental enrichment⁴, farmed rabbits⁵, chicken welfare⁶, slaughter/killing of farm animals⁷ and a proposed new national animal health body⁸.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Animal Health and Welfare Strategy for Great Britain, Defra 2004.
- 2 Farm Animal Welfare Council report on the implications of castration and tail docking for the welfare of lambs. June 2008.
- 3 Range enhancement for laying hens, University of Bristol.
- 4 Farm Animal Welfare Council consultation on Mutilations and environmental enrichment in growing pigs.
- 5 Council of Europe Draft Recommendation Concerning Domestic Rabbits (T-AP (98) 1, 15th revision).
- 6 Defra Consultation on New Regulations and Code for Meat Chicken Welfare.
- 7 Defra Consultation on the draft EU Slaughter and Killing Regulation.
- 8 Defra Consultation on a new independent body for animal health: A modern governance and funding structure for tackling animal diseases.

WELFARE INDICATOR: The number of animals transported live from the UK for slaughter and further fattening

RSPCA concern

The transport of live farm animals from the UK to other countries for slaughter or further fattening is a process that is both unnecessary and fraught with risk to animal health and welfare. The RSPCA advocates that all animals should be slaughtered as close as possible to where they are reared, with the frequency, duration and complexity of any travel minimised, and the quality of the transport process as a whole optimised. Live transport from the UK for slaughter or further fattening fails to satisfy these criteria. Firstly, the travel is essentially unnecessary, as animals could be fattened and slaughtered in the UK and their meat exported instead. In addition, exported animals are taken on potentially long and complex journeys (involving both land and sea travel), which are governed by legislation that does not adequately protect their welfare. The law fails to take proper account of scientific research and practical experience relating to animals' needs in areas such as journey length, space allowance and temperature/ventilation. In addition, some animals exported for further fattening may be sent to rearing systems that would be illegal in the UK, and/or provide conditions that fall below standard UK practice, further strengthening the welfare-related case for retaining animals in the UK for rearing.

Background

Scientific evidence¹ indicates that transport can result in serious health and welfare problems for farm animals. Livestock are subjected to a series of unfamiliar experiences and conditions, inevitably resulting in some degree of stress. Dehydration, thirst, hunger, heat and cold stress, inability to rest comfortably, injury and even death may occur in transit if the animals' needs are not properly satisfied in terms of provision of food and water, appropriate temperature, humidity and ventilation, enough space and bedding, and effective monitoring by accompanying hauliers/attendants. Poor driving technique, such as cornering too quickly or braking too hard, also has a major effect on welfare, leading to falling and injury¹. Animals can become ill after travel due to a suppressed immune system resulting from stress¹, whilst animals already suffering from disease during transport can become more 'infective' when stressed, so are more likely to transmit illness to others in transit².

The journey complexity is also important. Journeys involving more than one loading/unloading process, and/or different modes of transport, such as those undertaken during export from the UK, clearly add to the potential for stress, distress and injury, with the loading and unloading processes being particularly challenging to some species. It has also been recommended – on the basis of research – that some young animals, such as calves under four weeks of age, should not be 'marketed' at all due to their inability to cope adequately with all the physical and mental challenges posed by the transport and associated processes³.

Current EU legislation on live transport⁴ is implemented in the UK through the Welfare of Animals (Transport) (England) Order 2006. However, the law fails to protect adequately the welfare of farm animals in transit. For example, it fails to take account of research indicating how much space farm animals need, what maximum travel times and feed/water intervals should be for different species and ages of animal, and appropriate temperatures and humidity. Poor enforcement of the law in some countries, as evidenced by the European Commission's own inspection body, the Food and Veterinary Office (FVO)⁵, as well as by the findings of investigations undertaken by other bodies including the RSPCA⁶, adds to the likelihood of welfare problems occurring.

The indicator figures

The number of live animals transported from the UK has been reported by Defra on its website for a number of years. The figures were obtained from sailing reports made by State Veterinary Service (now called Animal Health) staff. However, from mid 2006 onwards



THERE IS LITTLE CHANGE FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR.

Table 1: Number of live farm animals⁷ exported from the UK for slaughter or further fattening, 2000–2008

	Number for fattening	Number for slaughter	Total number
2000	Not available	Not available	752,150 ^A
2001 ^B	Not available	Not available	109,316
2002 ^C	Not available	Not available	130,048
2003	61,931	6,682	68,613
2004	41,622	6,826	48,448
2005	Not available	Not available	37,104
2006 ^D	192,383	338,205	530,588 ^E
2007 ^F	155,422	305,156	460,578 ^G
2008 ^H	145,614	300,046	445,660 ^I

Data source: Defra website, except for 2006 (see point D below) and 2007 (see point F below).

A – Includes 1,230 pigs.

B – In 2001, exports only took place during January and part of February, due to the ban imposed following the outbreak of Foot-and-Mouth Disease (FMD).

C – In 2002, live exports did not resume until July following the end of the FMD outbreak.

D – Data obtained from answer given by the Minister of State for Defra in answer to a parliamentary question – Hansard: HL Deb, 17 July 07, c9WA.

E – Includes 128,028 cattle (122,028 of which were for further fattening), 289,529 sheep (70,335 went for further fattening) and 113,031 'other' livestock (20 of which were for further fattening).

F – Data obtained from Defra via a Freedom of Information Act request, July 2008. Defra's source quoted as the EU Commission TRACES database.

G – Includes 167,252 cattle (147,719 of which were for further fattening), 205,622 sheep (7,668 of which went for further fattening) and 87,704 other livestock (namely pigs and goats, 35 of which went for further fattening).

H – Data obtained from the response to a Parliamentary Question by the Minister of State for Defra – Hansard: HL Deb 17 March 2009 c1016W.

I – See Table 2 for species-specific details.

these figures were no longer available on Defra's website. In order to obtain figures for 2008 a parliamentary question was developed and tabled to Defra⁷. As the source (UK government) was essentially the same as that from which previous years' figures were obtained, a valid comparison could be made. However, it should be noted that a similar approach had failed to elicit the 2007 figures from government. Hence, the live export figures for 2007 had to be obtained via a Freedom of Information Act disclosure request to Defra⁸. When responding, Defra quoted its source as the EU Commission's TRACES database. This is different from the data source previously used by Defra. However, as both sources are governmental, it will be assumed that it is reasonable and meaningful to make a direct comparison between the data from 2007 and other years.

Unsurprisingly the figures show that live exports fell sharply following the Foot-and-Mouth Disease outbreak in 2001, with 2005 levels being only five per cent of those in 2000. This could indicate that alternatives were sought and successfully developed for the livestock

(primarily sheep) that were no longer being transported overseas. Slaughtering animals in the UK and exporting the meat instead is already the way in which the vast majority of lamb is exported. The negative effect of transport-related stress and injury on meat quality is well documented⁹. Hence, the export of meat instead of livestock is a positive approach in terms of both animal welfare and product quality, lending further incentive to achieving complete phasing out of live exports for slaughter and further fattening.

The figures showed a very significant increase in the number of cattle exported live from the UK during 2006 – from zero in 2005 to 128,028, the vast majority of which (122,028) went for further fattening. It is reasonable to assume that this was primarily due to the resumption of the trade in live calves to the Continent for veal production, following the lifting in May 2006 of the 10-year ban on UK bovine exports imposed due to high levels of BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) in the UK. The demand for these mainly dairy-bred calves in veal producing countries such as the Netherlands,

Table 2: Number of live cattle, sheep, goats and pigs transported from the UK to other EU member states during 2008

Livestock type	Number for fattening	Number for slaughter	Total number
Cattle	84,484	17,597	102,081
Sheep	58,416	256,447	314,863
Goats	4	1	5
Pigs	2,710	26,001	28,711
Total number	145,614	300,046	445,660

Data source: Collected by Defra from TRACES database.

coupled with an unfavourable UK market for these animals and a poor economic situation in the UK dairy industry, resulted in an immediate rekindling of an active trade as soon as the ban was lifted. The veal crate system, in which calves were reared in small, barren individual pens, was banned throughout the EU from January 2007, and it is thought that most veal producers had already converted to group housing systems by the time the UK calf exports resumed in May 2006. However, concerns about the conditions in which the calves are reared in Continental Europe remain due to continuing discrepancies between even the new EU legislation and UK law, as well as between common UK industry practice and systems used on the Continent. The resumption of the trade in live calves to veal-rearing systems abroad halted the previously encouraging decline in total live exports for further fattening noted over several years up to 2006. This steady fall had indicated that alternative outlets may have been developed and utilised for some animals, and hence that the process of live export could indeed be successfully replaced. However, it is also clear that for a number of years, many dairy bull calves have been killed on-farm at an early age (e.g. around 150,000 in 2007 according to Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board [AHDB] estimates¹⁰) due to difficulties in finding a market for them in the UK. This added further incentive to look for practical solutions to the live calf export trade that would satisfy all stakeholders and improve animal welfare. This led to the formation of a forum Beyond Calf Exports Forum, initiated in 2006 by the RSPCA and Compassion in World Farming, which brought together all the major stakeholders with involvement or interest in the issue, including the food and farming industries, livestock welfare research scientists and government. The reasons behind the trade in calves are a complex mixture of factors, and the aim of the forum has been to develop financially and practically viable alternatives to the live calf export trade that can help to ensure dairy-bred calves remain in the UK for rearing.

Three sub-groups have explored potential ways forward in three key areas:

- i) identifying opportunities for developing new markets for beef and veal from male dairy calves in the UK
- ii) identifying the barriers (and potential solutions) to developing a sustainable (in welfare and commercial terms) dairy cow in the UK
- iii) investigating the question as to how to ensure acceptable levels of welfare for male dairy calves during rearing in the UK, particularly looking at the options put forward by the two other sub-groups.

The forum completed its initial work at the end of 2007, and produced a report¹¹ setting out clear recommendations as to the way forward. Progress continued during 2008, with some highly positive and potentially very effective initiatives being put in place by several major UK retailers aimed at encouraging and sustaining the utilisation of dairy bull calves within the UK beef market. Facilitating the use of sexed semen to produce calves of the desired gender, and linking their dairy suppliers directly with their beef suppliers, are two such processes initiated by food retailers.

Comparison between the live export figures for 2008 and those of the previous year indicate that the total number of animals exported live from the UK in 2008 for further fattening or slaughter fell slightly (by around 15,000) compared with 2007. A fall is seen in both categories, and follows on from the drop in total live exports of 70,000 noted between 2006 and 2007. However, whilst far fewer cattle, pigs and goats were transported overseas in 2008 than the previous year, there was a significant rise in the number of sheep exported (314,863 in 2008 versus 205,622 in 2007) particularly for further fattening purposes (58,416 versus 7,668 respectively). The reason for this is unclear, but is concerning from an animal welfare viewpoint. It also raises questions

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE INDICATES THAT TRANSPORT CAN RESULT IN SERIOUS HEALTH AND WELFARE PROBLEMS FOR FARM ANIMALS.

relating to possible reputational risk to the British sheep industry, in view of the known public concern about the export of live animals. In contrast, there were fewer live cattle (including calves) exported from the UK in 2008 compared with the previous year, the overall fall being around 65,000 (i.e. 102,081 versus 167,252).

Cattle exports for slaughter and for further fattening both fell, though the latter category saw the more significant drop (from 147,719 in 2007 to 84,484 in 2008). It is highly likely that this reduction was due, at least in part, to the fall in demand seen in 2008 for UK animals from major veal calf importers such as the Netherlands, as a result of concerns about bovine TB in the UK herd. However, it is also worth noting that several of the initiatives resulting from the work of the Beyond Calf Exports Forum were beginning to take effect during 2008, and could also have been responsible for the retention of greater numbers of dairy calves in the UK for beef production. Although the rise in sheep exports is disappointing, the decline in transport overseas of other species (namely pigs and goats), coupled with the on-going

efforts of the Calf Forum members, lead the RSPCA to believe that it will still be feasible for the export of live animals for slaughter or further fattening to cease within the next few years. This would avoid the many associated risks to welfare faced by livestock during the export process and in some cases, subsequent rearing and/or slaughter overseas. In addition, the RSPCA is keen to see significant improvements in content, implementation and enforcement of European legislation relating to live transport as a whole, particularly with regard to reduced journey times, greater space allowances, stricter temperature requirements and more resources allocated to monitoring and enforcement in all member states. At the time of writing, discussions are ongoing at the level of the European Commission about amending EU live transport regulation. The RSPCA will be pressing the Commission to ensure that the key welfare-related issues previously mentioned are included in that review, in the hope that legislation that more effectively protects animal welfare in transit will result.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 European Commission Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare report: The welfare of animals during transport (details for horses, pigs, sheep and cattle). March 2002.
- 2 Kent J E and Ewbank R. (1986). The effect of road transportation on the blood constituent and behaviour of calves. II. One to three weeks old. *British Veterinary Journal* 142, 131–140. Kent J E and Ewbank R. 1986. The effect of road transportation on the blood constituent and behaviour of calves. III. Three months old. *British Veterinary Journal* 142, 326–335.
- 3 Knowles T G. (1995). A review of the post-transport mortality among younger calves. *Veterinary Record* 317, 406–407.
- 4 Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations.
- 5 For further information on the FVO, including its reports on implementation and enforcement of live transport law in EU countries, see: http://ec.europa.eu/comm/food/fvo/index_en.htm
- 6 Standing room only – science and suffering in European live animal transport. Chapter 3. RSPCA 2003.
- 7 HL Deb 17 March 2009 c1016W.
- 8 HL Deb 29 April 2008 c285W.
- 9 Gregory N G. 1998. *Animal Welfare and Meat Science*, CAB International.
- 10 The Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) is a NDPB (non-departmental public body) established under the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board Order 2008. It became operational on 1 April 2008. www.ahdb.org.uk
- 11 Beyond Calf Exports Forum: Report on Conclusions and Recommendations, January 2008.

WELFARE INDICATOR: The production of UK non-cage eggs as a proportion of total eggs produced

RSPCA concern

More than half of UK egg laying hens, about 17 million birds, still face a life in battery cages that do not meet the welfare needs of the birds¹. Conventional barren cages are to be banned from 2012², however, so-called 'enriched' battery cages will still be allowed. Enriched cages provide a minimum of just 50 square centimetres extra usable space (about the size of a beer mat) for each hen compared to conventional cages, and limited facilities. Evidence indicates that neither conventional nor enriched cages adequately satisfy the birds' physical or behavioural requirements¹.

The RSPCA believes that all hens should be kept in properly managed free-range or barn systems³, which can provide hens with much higher standards of welfare compared with cages¹.

Background

There are several key welfare issues relating to laying hens.

■ Space allowance

Hens naturally carry out numerous basic comfort behaviours, such as feather ruffling, head scratching, body shaking, wing stretching and flapping. Insufficient space in both types (conventional and enriched) of battery cage does not allow the birds to properly carry out these behaviours. In contrast, free-range and barn systems allow free movement of hens over a large area so that they can move away from other birds, increase bone strength and gain access to all the different facilities without difficulty¹.

■ Dustbathing

Dustbathing is an important physical and behavioural requirement for laying hens, enabling them to preen and recondition their feathers as well as helping to maintain a comfortable body temperature. A scratch area is provided in enriched cages, but the RSPCA believes that the scratch area is not only restrictive in space, but cannot provide the appropriate substrate for adequate dustbathing. In free-range and barn systems hens are provided with enough space as well as access to litter in which the birds are able to dustbathe when and where they choose¹.

■ Egg laying

Hens are extremely motivated to gain access to a suitable nest site in which to lay their eggs and will perform complex pre-laying behaviours¹. Currently enriched cages provide only one small nest space in each cage and birds will be forced to compete for this site each day. In free-range and barn systems there is considerably more nest area available compared to enriched cages, giving the hens plenty of opportunity to gain access to and spend appropriate time in the nest site of their choice¹.

■ Perching

Depending on the positioning of perches in enriched cages, it may be difficult for birds to perch undisturbed or move around the cage. In free-range and barn systems hens are able to freely use perches that do not detract from the overall floor area¹.

In three years' time the European Directive on the protection of laying hens will be implemented in full, which will mark the end of conventional battery cages throughout Europe. Producers will then have the choice of barn, free-range, organic or enriched cages in which to keep hens for egg production.



THERE IS AN INCREASE IN THE PROPORTION OF NON-CAGED EGGS PRODUCED.

The RSPCA would like to see all cages banned and converted to non-cage or 'alternative' systems, compliant with the RSPCA's Welfare Standards for Laying Hens⁴. In support of this, research has shown that some barn systems can offer a financially comparable alternative to the cost of installing enriched cages¹. Evidence also shows that the vast majority of UK caged egg producers will have written off their existing conventional cage equipment costs and will be ready to invest in new equipment by 2012 irrespective of the Directive⁵.

The indicator figures

Data on the number of eggs produced in the UK, according to the method of production, is collected by Defra every three months. The data is based on egg packing throughput surveys for all class A eggs (suitable for retail) and is widely quoted by the egg industry and other relevant organisations. Numbers are given for cage, barn and free-range (which includes organic) eggs. These production figures give a picture of the UK egg market and provide a general indication of the welfare of hens by determining what proportion of the total number of eggs are produced in higher welfare systems compared to cages. From these figures changes in the use of different methods of production over a period of years can then be analysed. Since 2006, the numbers of organic eggs produced have also been collected. Any trends in the use of this type of production system over successive years will be apparent when there is enough data. The majority of class A eggs will be found on supermarket shelves and so an indication of consumer choice and influence on the supply of eggs from different systems of production can also be gained from the changes in numbers of eggs produced.

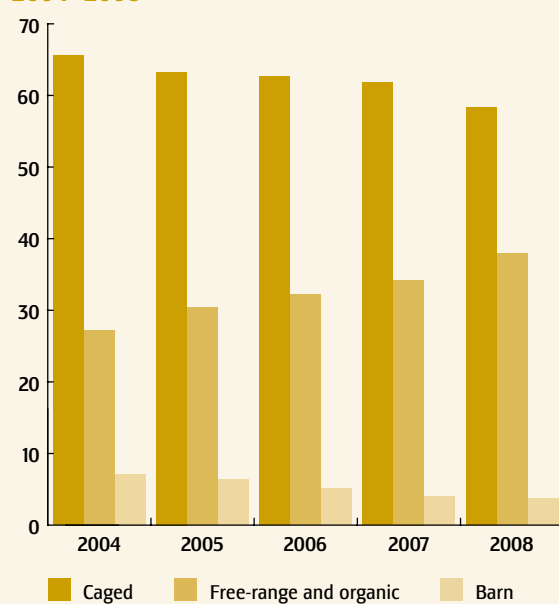
In 2008 approximately 30 million hens in the UK produced 8,885 million class A eggs. The percentage of eggs produced in each system was as follows.

- Cages: 58 per cent.
- Free-range: 38 per cent (of which six per cent were organic)
- Barn: Four per cent.

Data source: Defra.

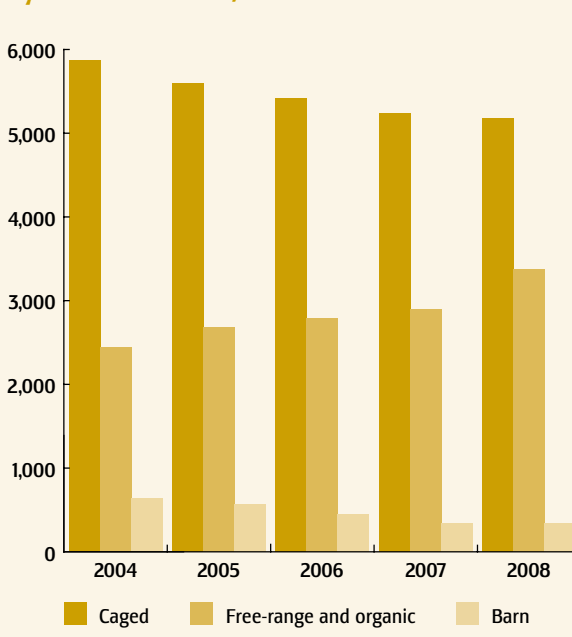
The proportion of eggs produced in non-cage systems has increased by four per cent compared to the previous year. This is one of the most significant year-on-year changes in the last 10 years. In terms of numbers of eggs, non-cage have increased by 14 per cent since the previous year, cage have decreased by one per cent.

Figure 1: Eggs produced in different systems as a percentage of total annual egg production, 2004–2008



Data source: Defra.

Figure 2: Number of eggs produced in different systems in millions, 2004–2008



Data source: Defra.

Looking over the last decade, the indicator figures show an encouraging movement of the industry as a whole towards higher welfare alternative systems for housing hens. In 1998 just 21 per cent of class A eggs in the UK were produced in alternative systems, totalling 1,817 million eggs compared to 7,022 million caged eggs. By 2008, this had doubled, to a figure of 42 per cent and the number of birds in the UK non-cage flock had more than doubled. The trend over the past five years is shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Consumer demand, changes in retailer policy and industry growth can help to explain the decrease in cage eggs. Regarding 2008 in particular, it was reported that the first three months saw a significant increase in sales of free-range eggs, with British Lion eggs claiming that free-range retail egg sales rose by almost 20 per cent in volume in February 2008⁶. Additionally, The Co-operative stopped selling eggs from caged hens in February 2008 and Waitrose, already selling only non-cage eggs, completed the move to 100 per cent non-cage eggs as an ingredient in own-brand products, such as quiches, cakes, pasta and sandwich fillings.

Positive changes in the indicator are hoped to continue in the next few years as more major retailers plan to decrease or stop the sale of whole eggs or those eggs used as an ingredient from caged hens. For

example, Sainsbury's ceased selling cage eggs at the beginning of 2009, a year ahead of their target date and equivalent to 2.5 million cage eggs per week, or half a million hens⁷. Sainsbury's is also committed to using only free-range eggs as an ingredient in all own-brand products by 2012. Morrisons continue the trend by committing to the phasing out of the sale of boxes of own-brand cage eggs by 2010. This follows the lead of Marks & Spencer, the first retailer to sell only free-range whole eggs, and which since 2002 included products containing eggs. In 2008, Hellmann's made the decision to use only free-range eggs in its mayonnaise in response to growing media attention and consumer concern for chickens⁸. Along with Cadbury Creme Egg, The National Trust, and Subway, Hellmann's was among the winners of Compassion in World Farming's 'Good Egg Awards 2008'⁹.

The RSPCA believes that in the future increasing alternative egg production requires government to take the lead concerning transparent information for consumers buying eggs in any form (whole or as an ingredient).

The RSPCA would like to see 100 per cent of UK eggs being produced in cage-free systems.

LOOKING OVER THE LAST DECADE, THE INDICATOR FIGURES SHOW AN ENCOURAGING MOVEMENT OF THE INDUSTRY AS A WHOLE TOWARDS HIGHER WELFARE ALTERNATIVE SYSTEMS FOR HOUSING HENS.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ *The case against cages: Evidence in favour of alternative systems for laying hens*. 2005. RSPCA.
- ² The Council Directive 1999/74/EC of 19 July 1999 laying down minimum standards for the protection of laying hens currently requires that conventional battery cages be phased out by 2012. However, the review of the Directive, due in 2005, has yet to be undertaken.
- ³ The vast majority of alternative egg production systems in the UK are Freedom Food accredited, complying with RSPCA Welfare Standards.
- ⁴ www.rspca.org.uk/farmanimals
- ⁵ *Coming of age: The age structure of UK caged egg production facilities*. 2006. RSPCA.
- ⁶ www.brittegg.co.uk 31 March 2008.
- ⁷ Sainsbury's to stop selling eggs from caged hens, J Sainsbury plc, 17 January 2009.
- ⁸ www.ciwf.org.uk/news/laying_hens/hellmanns_uk_goes_freerange.aspx
- ⁹ www.ciwf.org.uk/good_egg_awards/english/default.aspx

WELFARE INDICATOR: The number of meat chickens reared to higher on-farm welfare standards

RSPCA concern

In the UK, the average annual consumption of chicken meat exceeds that of any other type of meat¹. Consequently, meat chickens (broilers) are by far the most numerous farm animals reared for meat in the UK (about 830 million each year) accounting for approximately one-third of total meat production¹.

The welfare issues faced by many chickens can be particularly severe. Fast growth rates, low space allowance and poor environmental conditions can all contribute to major welfare problems being experienced by today's meat chicken. However, the adoption of higher welfare standards can effectively address these issues and significantly contribute to the improvement of chicken welfare².

The RSPCA would like all chickens to be reared to higher welfare standards akin to those developed by the Society.

Background

Owing to the number of animals involved and the severity of the welfare issues that can be encountered, the number of chickens reared to higher welfare standards is an important welfare indicator to monitor. There are currently four key issues that can have a significant effect on the welfare of meat chickens. One of the issues – growth rate – concerns the bird itself, whereas the other three relate to the management of the birds.

■ Growth rate

The rate at which broilers grow can have a considerable effect on their welfare³. Meat chickens have been genetically selected to grow quickly. In production terms, genetic selection for high growth rate has been very successful: the time from when the birds first hatch to appearing on the supermarket shelves can be as little as five weeks. However, this rapid weight gain can cause severe health problems, such as lameness and heart defects³.

■ Stocking density

Stocking density refers to the amount of space allocated to each bird and is expressed as bird weight per square metre. High stocking densities can impair welfare directly through movement restriction and indirectly by contributing to poor litter and air quality³. When stocking densities exceed 30kg per square metre there is a steep rise in the frequency of serious welfare problems³. For example, at high stocking densities, the prevalence of lameness and skin diseases can substantially increase. High stocking densities also make it difficult for birds to perform many of their natural behaviours³.

■ Lighting

Welfare problems can arise at light intensities below 20 lux³. At low light intensities birds are less active, which can contribute to the development of lameness and contact dermatitis. At very low light levels, birds can develop eye abnormalities⁴. Meat chickens may also be reared under a near-continuous lighting regime as this encourages the birds to feed for longer periods, which maximises their growth rate. There is scientific evidence showing that preventing meat chickens from having a proper dark period adversely affects their welfare⁵.

■ Environmental enrichment

A more stimulating, enriched environment encourages birds to be more active, which can help reduce leg and skin problems³. Chickens provided with an enriched environment are more active – walking and running more, and sitting down less – than those kept without any form of enrichment⁶.



THERE IS A LARGE INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF CHICKENS REARED TO HIGHER WELFARE STANDARDS.

Table 3: Summary of key differences in on-farm welfare standards between ACP and RSPCA standards

Key welfare issue		ACP standards (the chicken industry's own standards)	RSPCA standards (as used by Freedom Food)
Average genetic growth rate (g/bird/day)		No restriction	Maximum 45
Stocking density in house (kg per square metre)		Above 38 permitted	Maximum 30
Lighting	Intensity	Minimum of 10 lux	Minimum 100 lux over 75% of floor area and 20 lux over remaining 25%
	Dark period	Minimum four hours – except first seven and last 10 days whereby minimum one hour.	Minimum six hours – except first seven and last three days whereby minimum two hours
	Natural lighting	No requirement	Required by 1 January 2010
Environmental enrichment		No requirement	Straw bales, perches and pecking objects

Data source: ACP and RSPCA.

Chickens can be raised either indoors or with access to the outdoors, i.e. free-range, but their welfare is primarily affected by the standards they are reared to. Most chickens are reared according to standards set by the UK chicken industry's own assurance scheme – Assured Chicken Production (ACP). However, chickens can be reared to higher welfare standards, such as those of the RSPCA, which are implemented by the Society's own farm assurance scheme – Freedom Food.

Table 3 compares the RSPCA's Welfare Standards for Chickens⁷ with the ACP standards⁸ for the key issues affecting chicken welfare on-farm. It should be noted, however, that the RSPCA standards require higher standards of welfare to be implemented throughout the whole of the chicken's life – from hatching right the way through to slaughter – and not just during rearing, i.e. on-farm.

In addition to ACP standards, some supermarkets also require some or all of their suppliers to rear chickens to standards that the supermarket has set itself, which can be higher than those set by ACP. The Co-operative's British Elmwood Chicken, Marks & Spencer's Oakham Chicken, Tesco's Willow Farm Chicken, and Waitrose Select Farm Chicken are all reared to higher on-farm welfare standards, compared to those of ACP. Such chickens are referred to as 'standard plus'. The retail of standard plus chickens is a recent phenomenon: Tesco and Waitrose launched their standard plus lines during June and September 2006, respectively, whilst Marks & Spencer's and The Co-operative's standard plus lines were not available until May and October 2007, respectively.

In June 2010, the Council Directive⁹ laying down minimum rules for

the protection of chickens kept for meat production comes into effect across the European Union. It is the first piece of legislation specifically concerning broilers and will bring some common standards for the treatment of chickens across Europe. Disappointingly, however, the Directive will permit producers to stock chickens at 42kg per square metre, a density that is unacceptable and will have a detrimental impact on chicken welfare. This stocking density is above that of current UK industry standards⁸ (Table 3) which do not allow producers to plan to stock chickens at more than 38kg per square metre and well above that of 30kg per square metre which the RSPCA believes to be the maximum level at which good welfare can be achieved. The Society is concerned that the industry will further weaken their standards to be in line with the legislation and that the welfare of chickens could worsen not only in the UK, but in some other European countries too. The legislation also does nothing to address the very serious welfare issues associated with the fast growth rates of broilers.

The indicator figures

The approximate number of meat chickens reared in the UK to higher welfare standards¹⁰ and to the chicken industry's own standards (ACP) is shown in Table 4. There has been a steady annual decline in the total number of meat chickens reared in the UK over the last five years (down 38.7 million between 2004 and 2008, Table 4). Between 2004 and 2008, inclusive, there was a year-on-year reduction in the number of chickens reared to ACP standards (down 184.6 million, 21.7 per cent).

Table 4: The approximate number and proportion of meat chickens reared in the UK to higher welfare standards and to the chicken industry's own standards (ACP), 2004–2008

Standard/system	Total number of birds reared (million)					Proportion of total (%)				
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
ACP ^a	849.38	827.51	814.09	719.00	664.74	97.82	96.13	95.23	85.19	80.12
Standard plus	–	–	–	69.39	91.79	–	–	–	8.22	11.06
RSPCA (indoor) ^{b,d}	10.07	22.69	25.14	35.65	50.70	1.16	2.64	2.94	4.22	6.11
RSPCA (free-range) ^{c,d}					4.40				4.70	1.03
Free-range ^e	7.84	9.38	13.77	8.48	15.42	0.90	1.09	1.61	1.00	1.86
Organic ^f	1.06	1.22	1.84	2.74	2.63	0.12	0.14	0.22	0.32	0.32
Total	868.35	860.80	854.84	843.96	829.68	100				

- a** Commercial broiler chick placings in the UK from UK and non-UK (i.e. imported broiler chicks) hatcheries. Due to calculations, figures also include a small number of chicks reared as free-range and organic or to standards other than ACP. Data from Defra¹.
- b** Chickens reared indoors to RSPCA welfare standards and within the Freedom Food scheme.
- c** Free-range chickens reared to RSPCA welfare standards and within the Freedom Food scheme.
- d** Data supplied by Freedom Food Ltd. Chickens reared to the RSPCA standards and not within the Freedom Food scheme have not been included. For years 2004–2006, inclusive, only one figure is presented for chickens reared indoors and as free-range (where applicable). RSPCA welfare standards can be applied to all systems of production, i.e. indoor and free-range, including organic.
- e** Does not include free-range chickens reared to the RSPCA's standards and within the Freedom Food scheme. Data supplied by four largest UK free-range producers, which represent the majority of the UK free-range market. This data is not collected centrally by any organisation.
- f** Data from Defra². Data collected by organic certification officers during annual on-farm inspections. Data therefore represents number of chickens on farm at that time and not the total throughput of animals during the year.

Over the same period, the total number of chickens reared to higher welfare standards increased (up 146 million birds, 769.5 per cent). Compared to 2007, the number of birds reared to higher welfare standards in 2008 increased by 40 million birds, which equates to an increase of 32 per cent (up from 14.8 to 19.9 per cent of the total market). Therefore, in 2008, approximately one in every five chickens produced in the UK were reared to welfare standards higher than those of ACP. This large increase was primarily due to the number of chickens reared to individual supermarkets higher welfare standards, i.e. standard plus (up 32.3 per cent), but also to birds reared indoors to RSPCA standards and those reared as free-range only, which increased by 42.2 and 81.8 per cent, respectively. However, birds reared as free-range to RSPCA standards decreased by 49.4 per cent. This decrease was, in part, due

to difficulties in obtaining genetically slower growing birds to meet the growth rate requirement within the RSPCA standards. There was little change in the number of organic birds reared.

In 2008, 55.7 per cent (55.5 per cent in 2007) of chickens reared to higher welfare standards were reared to the individual supermarkets' own higher welfare standards, i.e. standard plus. This was followed by those chickens reared to the RSPCA standards (33.4 per cent) (35.5 per cent in 2007), then those reared as free-range only (9.3 per cent) (6.8 per cent in 2007) and then organic (1.6 per cent) (2.2 per cent in 2007).

Total free-range production represented 2.4 per cent (19.8 million birds) (two per cent/17.2 million birds in 2007) of the total market and 12 per cent of the higher welfare market in 2008. Of all the free-range birds reared, 22.2 per cent (50.6 per cent in 2007) were reared to RSPCA standards.

The RSPCA believes that the significant media attention on the

production of chickens during 2008 helped with the rise in the number of meat chickens reared to higher welfare standards. In January 2008, Channel Four aired a number of programmes that looked at how chickens are reared. TV chefs Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall both appeared in programmes that put the spotlight on the rearing of chickens. *Jamie's Fowl Dinners*¹³ demonstrated the reality of 'how chickens live and die to put food on our plates'. *Hugh's Chicken Run*¹⁴ challenged the realities of intensive farming with Fearnley-Whittingstall setting up and managing a free-range and an intensively reared chicken unit. Around 12.4 million people watched the two programmes. An opinion poll¹⁵ commissioned by the RSPCA demonstrated that 57 and 43 per cent of those questioned had watched *Jamie's Fowl Dinners* and *Hugh's Chicken Run*, respectively. The same poll¹⁵ showed that 79 per cent agreed that animal welfare is an important consideration when buying chicken.

In 2006¹⁶ and 2008¹⁵, 70 per cent of people stated that they usually buy higher welfare chicken, that is labelled Freedom Food, free-range or organic. However, in 2006, just over two per cent of chickens produced in the UK were reared to such higher welfare standards, and although this has now increased to 8.82 per cent, there is still a large discrepancy between what people say or believe they are buying and the actual production figures. This could be due to a number of factors, such as labelling (either the lack of labelling or confusion about wording and/or the images depicted), price (higher welfare chicken can be more expensive than standard chicken), a difficulty in finding higher welfare products and/or a lack of availability or choice.

The RSPCA welcomes the increase in the number of chickens reared to higher on-farm welfare standards and would like to see all meat chickens reared to higher welfare standards, akin to the RSPCA's Welfare Standards for Chickens, which take proper account of the birds' physical and behavioural needs. However, the Society is concerned about the potential impact on the welfare of chickens in the UK when the new Directive comes into force in 2010 and is calling on the chicken industry, at the very least, to not further weaken their standards.

The RSPCA would also welcome the collection and publication of data on the number of chickens produced under the different methods of production.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 National Farmers Union and British Poultry Council. (2006). *British Chicken – What Price?* NFU, Warwickshire and BPC, London.
- 2 *Paying the price: The facts about chickens reared for their meat.* (2005). RSPCA.
- 3 European Commission – Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare. (2000). *The Welfare of Chickens Kept for Meat Production (Broilers)*. European Commission, Brussels, Belgium. June 2006. London.
- 4 Prescott N. (2005). The importance of light and vision to poultry. Proceeding of the workshop on lighting for domestic fowl. Silsoe Research Institute, Bedford, UK. March 2005.
- 5 Blockhuis H J. (1983). The relevance of sleep in poultry. *World Poultry Science Journal*, 39, 33–37.
- 6 Kells A and Dawkins M S. (2001). The effect of a 'Freedom Food' enrichment on the behaviour of broilers on commercial farms. *Animal Welfare*, 10, 347–356.
- 7 RSPCA. (2008). RSPCA Welfare Standards for Chickens. RSPCA, UK.
- 8 ACP. (2007). Assured Chicken Production Standards 2007–2008, Assured Chicken Production, UK.
- 9 Council Directive 2007/43/EC
- 10 Refers to chickens reared to individual supermarkets higher welfare standards, i.e. standard plus (see text), RSPCA welfare standards, organic certification scheme standards and birds reared as free-range.
- 11 Defra. (2007). Poultry and Poultrymeat Statistics Notice Defra, London. Available from: <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/statnot/ppntc.pdf>
- 12 Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Organic Statistics United Kingdom. June 2006. Defra, London. Available from: <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/statnot/orguk.pdf>
- 13 www.channel4.com/food/on-tv/jamie-oliver/jamies-fowl-dinners
- 14 www.channel4.com/food/on-tv/river-cottage/hughs-chicken-run/index.html
- 15 TNS poll: Results based on interviews with 2,011 adults aged 16+ in Great Britain. Telephone interviews between 8–17 February 2008.
- 16 TNS poll: Results based on interviews with 1,013 adults aged 16+ in Great Britain. Telephone interviews between 12–14 May 2006.

WELFARE INDICATOR: Piglet mortality levels between birth and weaning

RSPCA concern

The average mortality rate of piglets between birth and weaning (which on average in the UK takes place at just over 27 days of age¹) experienced on commercial pig farms in the UK is influenced by a number of factors, including the animals' environment, health care, management, nutrition and genetics of the mother and/or piglets.

It is reasonable to assume that in many cases, the deaths of these piglets will have been preceded by a period of suffering, with the nature, degree and duration of suffering depending on the cause of death and, potentially, the time of death; whether it occurred in utero, during the farrowing process or post farrowing.

The RSPCA believes that a reduction in the levels of pre-weaning piglet mortality would clearly be an important development in pig welfare.

Background

Much research has been carried out investigating the causes of pre-weaning piglet mortality, with the predominant cause dependent on the production system in use. On outdoor units, where sows farrow loose in individual huts, a significant proportion of deaths result from overlaying or crushing by the piglet's mother, the sow^{2,3}. Factors that contribute to the likelihood of crushing are numerous and include breed or genetic-related differences in the mothering behaviour and ability of sows⁴, the genetics of the male, boar, and the age and condition of the sow⁵. On indoor units, where farrowing crates predominate, starvation, savaging and severe diarrhoea are more common causes of pre-weaning mortality. In addition, farrowing time is often longer in farrowing crates⁶, which has been shown to result in the sow, or at least her uterine muscle tissue, becoming tired. This increases the risk of neonatal death, particularly of the last two to four piglets, for which the likelihood of death is approximately 50 per cent^{7,8}. Recently, a nutritional supplement has been developed for sows during farrowing that reportedly cuts stillbirths and neonatal mortality, mainly due to a reduction in farrowing time^{7,8}.

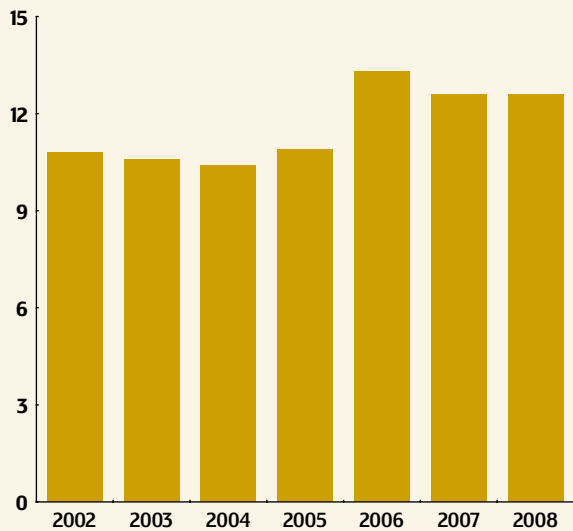
For both types of production, providing optimum nutrition during gestation and lactation is an important measure to help boost piglet birthweights and therefore survival; the risk of mortality in live-born pigs falls for piglets weighing 1.4kg or more⁹. The thermal environment is also important, particularly on indoor units; insulated accommodation, drying and warming the piglets immediately after birth, the provision of straw and extra heat (including floor heating) during farrowing, and fan ventilation as opposed to natural ventilation are all associated with reduced piglet mortality^{5,10,11}. Currently, research is being conducted to investigate the possibility of using thermal cameras to identify piglets suffering from hypothermia in the first few days after farrowing². This would allow the prompt and appropriate treatment of weak newborn piglets, improving their chances of survival.

Stock-keeper input can also have a considerable affect on piglet mortality, with mortality being reduced by up to half when the stock-keeper is present during farrowing^{5,13}. This is presumably as a result of increased detection of problems during farrowing and therefore a higher level of intervention when problems arise. Techniques and equipment are currently being developed to aid the detection of imminent farrowing and thus alert the farmer for supervision². Additionally, checking of the sow and her piglets twice a day, as opposed to once a day is associated with higher piglet survival rates⁵. The level of fearfulness of sows towards their stock-keepers



THERE IS LITTLE CHANGE FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR.

Figure 3: Average mortality levels (%) from birth to weaning of piglets born alive in the UK



Data source: BPEX Pig Yearbook 2009.

has been shown to affect both the length of time a sow takes to give birth and pre-weaning piglet survival with higher fearfulness being associated with higher death rates¹⁴. This illustrates the importance of positive, considerate handling and stockmanship in order to ensure that the pigs have trust in and lack of fear towards their stock-keepers. There may also be a seasonal effect on pre-weaning mortality. Recent data has indicated lower levels of pre-weaning mortality occurring in the summer and winter with small peaks occurring in the spring and autumn¹⁵.

Pre-weaning mortality is usually defined as the percentage of piglets that are born alive per litter that die prior to weaning. However, the percentage of those piglets born alive but die prior to weaning does not reflect the total number of potentially viable piglets that die. Stillbirths (0.63 piglets per litter in 2008) are the most common cause of death on indoor units¹⁶. Such deaths are not usually captured in data on pre-weaning mortality, thus total mortality (pre-weaning mortality plus those born dead) may, in fact, be a more useful welfare indicator. Not only do those piglets born dead represent a waste of life, we do not know at what stage of the farrowing process they died and whether their death was associated with pain and/or suffering. Such data is difficult to capture, particularly on commercial farms. However, it would provide a more valuable measure.

The indicator figures

As illustrated in Figure 3, having increased in 2006 to just over 13 per cent, 2007 saw a slight reduction in pre-weaning mortality levels to 12.6 per cent which has been maintained in 2008¹. Closer analysis of the data shows that the total number of piglets born alive per litter and the number of piglets reared per litter have both increased slightly on the previous year. As the mortality level has remained the same, in actual terms, more piglets per litter are dying. However, given that the national breeding herd has shrunk in overall terms, the total number of piglets dying before weaning has shrunk from 1.4 million in 2007 to 1.3 million in 2008¹⁷.

It is encouraging that the pre-weaning mortality figure has remained the same, despite the number of piglets born alive increasing. Traditionally an increase in pre-weaning mortality would have been expected as larger litter sizes usually lead to smaller and therefore more vulnerable piglets¹⁸ which are more likely to be crushed by the sow. The reason for this may be two-fold. A new vaccine (PCV2) to combat multi-systemic wasting diseases was introduced in 2008. Preliminary reports suggest that its use is associated with reduced mortality and an increase in weaned litter size of up to half a piglet per litter^{19,20}. In addition, anecdotal reports from the industry and pig breeding companies suggest that breeding goals are beginning to change, from litter size to parameters associated with survivability. It is interesting to note the Danish industry has changed the focus of their breeding goals from 'total born piglets' to 'live piglets day five' to reflect the fact that it is the number of piglets that survive rather than the number born per se that is important⁶.

Clearly, reducing pre-weaning piglet mortality to a figure near to zero would be extremely difficult to achieve. However, in view of the indications from practical experience that piglet mortality levels significantly lower than the national average can be achieved on some farms (pre-weaning mortality levels are more than two per cent lower in the top 10 per cent compared to the average), there is clearly the potential for improvement. This, coupled with the growing availability of information both on the causes of piglet deaths, and ways in which the problem might be reduced, would suggest that an annual reduction in the average level of one per cent over the next five years would be a realistic aspiration. If achieved, this would result in a fall from just under 12.6 per cent (in 2008)¹ down to just over seven per cent by the end of 2013, a drop that would prevent the deaths of approximately 1.6 million piglets²¹ over that period. Such a reduction would be of benefit both to the pig industry in economic terms and, most importantly, to pig welfare.

THE RSPCA BELIEVES THAT A REDUCTION IN THE LEVELS OF PRE-WEANING PIGLET MORTALITY WOULD CLEARLY BE AN IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENT IN PIG WELFARE.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 *BPEX Pig Yearbook*. (2009).
- 2 Svedensen J, Bengtsson A C H and Svedensen L S. (1986). Occurrence and causes of traumatic injuries in neonatal pigs. *Pig News Information* 7: 159–179.
- 3 Cronin G M and Smith J A. (1992). Effects of accommodation type and straw bedding around parturition and during lactation on the behaviour of primiparous sows and survival and growth of piglets to weaning. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 33, 191–208.
- 4 McPee C P, Kerr J C and Cameron N D. 2001. Peri-partum posture and behaviour of gilts and the location of their piglets in lines selected for components of efficient lean growth. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 71, 1–12.
- 5 An epidemiological study of risk factors associated with pre-weaning mortality on commercial pig farms. (2005). Report to Defra by the University of Bristol and the University of Warwick. Available to download from: www.defra.gov.uk/science/project_data/DocumentLibrary/AW0133/AW0133_4600_FRP.doc
- 6 Pedersen L J. (2008). Neonatal piglet mortality: crates versus indoor pen housing in relation to breeding for improved survival. In: Housing of farrowing and lactating sows on non-crate systems. DJF internal report animal science NR. 11, September 2008, eds L J Pedersen and VA Moustsen.
- 7 *Pig World* March (2007).
- 8 *Farmers Weekly* 23 February 2007.
- 9 Baxter E M, Jarvis D, D'Eath R B, Ross D W, Robson SK, Farish M, Nevison I M, Lawrence A B and Edwards S A. (2008). Investigating the behavioural and physiological indicators of neonatal survival in pigs. *Theriogenology* 69: 773–783.
- 10 Randolph C E, O'Gorman A J, Potter R A, Jones P H and Miller B G. (2005). Effects of insulation on the temperature within farrowing huts and the weaning weights of piglets reared on a commercial outdoor pig unit. *Veterinary Record* 157: 800–805.
- 11 Malmkvist M, Pedersen L J, Damgaard B M, Thodberg K, Jørgensen E and Labouriau R. (2006). Does floor heating around parturition affect the vitality of piglets born to loose housed sows? *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 99: 88–105.
- 12 Oliviero C, Heinonen M, Pastell M, Heikkonen J, Valros A, Vainio O and Peltoniemi O (2007) Modern technology in supervision of parturition to prevent piglet mortality. *Acta Veterinaria Scandinavica* 49(Suppl 1): S12.
- 13 White KR, Anderson DM and Bate LA. (1996). Increasing piglet survival through an improved farrowing management protocol. *Canadian Journal of Animal Science* 76: 491–495.
- 14 Janczak A M, Pedersen L J, Rydhmer L and Bakken M. (2003). Relation between early fear- and anxiety-related behaviour and maternal ability in sows. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 82, 121–135.
- 15 NADIS (2009) Veterinary Report & Forecast – February 2009 Available at: www.thepigsite.com/swinenews/20540/nadis-veterinary-report-forecast-february-2009
- 16 Riart G R, Edwards S A and English P R. (2000). Estudio de los factores que afectan mortalidad pre-destete en lechones nacidos a campo: comparación con sistemas intensivos. In: Congreso Mercosur de Producción Porcina.
- 17 Based on *BPEX Pig Yearbook* (2009) figures for number of breeding sows, piglets born alive per sow and piglet mortality rate in (2008).
- 18 Weary D M, Phillips P A, Pajor E A, Fraser D and Thompson B K. (1998). Crushing of piglets by sows: effects of litter features, pen features and sow behaviour. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 61, 103–111.
- 19 *Farmers Weekly*, 27 February 2009.
- 20 British Pig Executive. (2009). BPEX Annual Technical Report 2008–2009 pp43.
- 21 Calculated on the basis of the (2008) figure for percentage of piglets born alive, litters born per sow per year and the total number of sows in the UK, and assuming stable annual figures for these parameters.

WELFARE INDICATOR: The number, nature and outcomes of Animal Health¹ inspections of farms and livestock markets

RSPCA concern

The welfare of animals in the UK on farms and at livestock markets is governed by specific legislation. While the RSPCA believes that in a number of areas the law fails to protect farm animal welfare adequately, it does at least provide a baseline standard which all are required to achieve. Monitoring of the implementation of animal welfare legislation and ensuring its enforcement are, therefore, of considerable importance, and must be undertaken effectively – in terms of both quantity and quality of inspection. Similarly, the government issues codes of recommendation for the welfare of livestock that aim to set out ‘best practice’ in terms of the care of farm animals. Ascertaining the degree to which the codes are followed across the farming industry can, provide a general indication of the overall welfare state of farm animals in the UK.

The RSPCA believes the government must allocate increased resources to its farm animal welfare inspection (in terms of number and nature of inspection visits) of farm animal holdings, to ensure that legislation relating to livestock welfare is being implemented across the country, and that some of the important animal welfare conditions that are not presently recorded become an integral part of the veterinary surveillance programme in the future.

Background

Animal Health is an executive agency of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and it also works on behalf of the Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government and the Food Standards Agency. Animal Health succeeded the State Veterinary Service in 2007. It is described on the government’s website² as: “...the government’s executive agency primarily responsible for ensuring that farmed animals in Great Britain are healthy, disease-free and well looked after.”

The agency is the official inspection body acting on behalf of Defra, the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department (SEERAD) and the Welsh Assembly Government. A significant part of its work involves undertaking visits to livestock premises to ascertain the level of compliance with, and undertake enforcement of, UK legislation relating to farm animal welfare on farms. This includes the Animal Welfare Act 2006 which sets out the general requirements for looking after all animals, and is supplemented by the detailed requirements set out in the Welfare of Farmed Animals [England] Regulations 2007 and at livestock markets (primarily the Welfare of Animals at Markets Order 1990 and amendments).

Compliance with government Codes of Recommendation for the Welfare of Livestock, is also checked. Failure to achieve the ‘codes’ is not in itself a legal offence, but can be used as evidence of falling below ‘best practice’ in the event of an animal welfare-related prosecution. Under the reformed EU Common Agricultural Policy, the outcome of checks by the inspection agency on ‘cross compliance’ with livestock welfare legislation has a bearing on the level of subsidy payments that may be received by a producer. Failures in cross-compliance can result in some of the payment being withheld. Although in several areas, the RSPCA believes that current EU (and hence, for the most part, UK) farm animal welfare-related legislation fails to afford adequate protection to livestock, compliance with the law does at least help to ensure minimum standards of care. Government Codes of Recommendation, which set generally higher standards, help to offer more protection. The work of the agency is, therefore, very significant on several counts. The data it generates can be extremely valuable in terms of providing information on the status quo regarding the level of compliance with welfare law and codes, and also of assisting in decisions on where best to focus efforts to bring about necessary improvements. The number of visits and hence the proportion of livestock holdings visited is obviously also significant if a truly representational picture of the welfare state of the UK’s livestock is to be ascertained. Visits are undertaken on both a targeted and random basis, resulting not only from complaints but also from an elective process.



THERE IS LITTLE CHANGE FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR.

Table 5: Number of visits and inspections undertaken by Animal Health on farms and at livestock markets, 2003–2008

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Farms	2,817 (4,964)	3,149 (5,431)	3,349 (6,123)	3,834 (6,407)	3,978 ^a	4,124 (10,165)
Markets	3,647 (8,735)	3,658 (8,719)	2,943 (7,293)	2,569 (6,706)	2,425 (6,113)	2,819 (7,087)

Data source: Defra: The report of the Chief Veterinary Officer – Animal Health 2003–2008.

Note: The number of inspections is the second figure, shown in brackets.

More than one 'inspection' may take place during a single 'visit' to one premises, for example if more than one species is held at the site.

^a Comparable figures for 'inspections' are not available for 2007. Welfare inspections on farm consist of up to 11 assessment criteria and the figures for the total number of assessments made for each criteria are now reported.

Indicator figures

The total number of farm animal holdings (premises with farm animals) in the UK is estimated as being about 300,000 (this includes a substantial number of holdings which could not be classed as commercial farms, but still have a holding number because they have a small number of farm animals at the premises)³. Table 5 shows that there has been a small but steady year-on-year increase in the number of visits to farms undertaken by SVS/Animal Health between 2004 and 2008. However, the figures also show that the maximum number of visits to farms by SVS/Animal Health in any one of the years 2004–2008 was 4,124, which represents a relatively small percentage of the total number of holdings. This contrasts with the coverage achieved by farm assurance schemes, a number of which visit every scheme member every year, and a few of which undertake additional visits. It is, however, the case that the number of farms involved in a single scheme is significantly lower than the total in the country so higher 'coverage' is clearly easier to achieve.

The total number of livestock markets in the UK is around 150⁴. On average, therefore, each market received nearly 19 Animal Health visits during 2008. The outcome of the visits made by Animal Health is also reported in the Defra Chief Veterinary Officer's (CVO) report. The outcomes are recorded as falling into one of four categories: A (compliance with legislation and codes); B (compliance with legislation but not codes); C (non-compliance with legislation); and D (unnecessary pain, unnecessary distress seen on the visit).

The data are presented in the form of graphs in the CVO's report, without the actual figures being stated, making it difficult to report exact information here. However, the following conclusions regarding the situation in 2008 can be drawn from the graphs presented in the 2008 report.

- Non-compliance with Codes of Recommendation is seen most frequently on pig, beef and sheep and goat farms. Overall:
 - around 40 per cent of assessments undertaken on pig, beef and sheep and goat holdings during complaint or targeted visits identified a failure to comply with the relevant codes, and around two per cent of the visits recorded that sheep and goats had been caused unnecessary pain and distress, though this figure was found to be only around 15 per cent on programme, elective and cross-compliance visits with no record of animals having suffered unnecessary pain and distress
 - the non-compliance figures for broilers were around 30 per cent (complaint/targeted and elective respectively), which was an improvement of around 10 per cent for the complaint/targeted visits, but was more than 10 per cent worse for the elective visits compared to the previous year
 - for miscellaneous poultry, the figures were nearly 40 per cent (complaint/targeted) and almost 15 per cent (programme/elective). Both figures are slightly higher than the previous year, possibly reflecting the increased number of small poultry keepers who had registered their holdings.

- Combining data relating to all species visited, non-compliance with codes found on complaint or target farm visits was most common in the areas of:
 - disease treatment (around 50 per cent non-compliance – no change on the previous year)
 - housing (around 50 per cent, showing no change on the previous year)
 - environment (about 48 per cent, compared with around 53 per cent the previous year)
 - records (48 per cent – 2007 was about 51 per cent)
 - staffing issues (about 48 per cent compared with more than 45 per cent in 2007)
 - freedom of movement-related (just over 20 per cent of cases, a similar figure to the previous year's findings).
 - With regard to legislation:
 - an approximate 18 per cent failure rate in complying with requirements on keeping farm records was noted on complaint or target farm visits representing no change on the 2007 figure. This figure was found to be around five per cent on programme and elective visits, which was slightly less than the previous year
 - around a 12 per cent failure rate to comply with the law relating to disease treatment was noted on complaint and target visits, which illustrated no real change from the previous year (with no failures seen on programme/elective visits)
 - failure to adhere to legislation relating to animals' environments was noted in around 10 per cent of cases on programme/target farms, which was a slight improvement on the previous year (with no failures on programme/elective visits)
 - about 10 per cent non-compliance with legislation on feed and water was seen on complaint and target visits, with some unnecessary pain and distress being observed as a result, which was about the same as the previous year (but no failures were seen on programme/elective visits).
 - Overall, nearly 40 per cent of all assessments made on complaint or target farm visits identified a failure to comply with Codes of Recommendation for the welfare of livestock, representing no change from the previous year. Around 15 per cent on programme and elective visits noted codes non-compliance indicating a rise of around five per cent compared to 2007. Just under 10 per cent of assessments (complaint and target visits) noted non-compliance with legislation, a similar figure to 2007.
 - At livestock markets, the most common areas of non-compliance with codes were those relating to:
 - feed and water (just under 30 per cent of assessments identifying failures – similar to 2007)
 - bedding (approximately 28 per cent – slightly up on the 2007 figure of 25 per cent)
 - care of unfit animals (just over 20 per cent, a small improvement on the 25 per cent noted the previous year)
 - loading onto/unloading from vehicles (around 11 per cent, continuing the downward trend of the previous year).
- Generally, the incidence of non-compliance with legislation at livestock markets was reported as being very low, full compliance being recorded during 99 per cent of market inspections, which was the same as the previous year.

ANIMAL HEALTH SUCCEEDED THE STATE VETERINARY SERVICE IN 2007. IT IS DESCRIBED ON THE GOVERNMENT'S WEBSITE AS: "...THE GOVERNMENT'S EXECUTIVE AGENCY PRIMARILY RESPONSIBLE FOR ENSURING THAT FARMED ANIMALS IN GREAT BRITAIN ARE HEALTHY, DISEASE-FREE AND WELL LOOKED AFTER."

These data indicate some encouraging improvements in 2008 compared with the previous year in a number of areas relating to SVS/Animal Health findings on farms and at markets regarding compliance with law and codes. There are, however, a number of areas where little if any progress has been made. Similarly, the number of visits undertaken by the agency has increased only slightly, with visits only covering a relatively small percentage of holdings with farm animals. This makes it difficult to accept the outcome of Animal Health visits as truly representative of the situation across the whole livestock farming industry.

However, other developments during 2007 relating to the qualitative side of the Animal Health's work have been encouraging. In its Business Plan for 2007–2008, the agency stated that it intends to: "Establish an Inspections Programme, to analyse critical inspection points and on-farm activities and develop consistent risk-based inspections". From 1 January 2007, its work included inspections to check cross-compliance with animal welfare Statutory Management Requirements as part of EU Cross-Compliance Regulations. The risk model has been specifically developed and implemented for the purpose of allocating these inspections. In addition, the agency has previously stated that it is working with government to help develop

government policies that are: "both deliverable and focused on outcomes", an important development if the welfare of livestock is to be effectively assessed and, where necessary, improved. The RSPCA would like to see a more outcomes-based approach to farm and market inspections, in which a formal assessment is made not only of the resources (in terms of environment, feed and water etc.) provided, but also the end result in terms of the animals' health and welfare.

Whilst acknowledging that there have been some improvements compared to 2007, the nature of the information contained in the report still does not allow us to meaningfully evaluate the health and welfare of herds and flocks within the UK. For example, the Animal Health report 2008 informs us about adherence to legislation and the codes, but provides little, if any, information which would allow us to understand the level of mastitis in the dairy herd, or lameness in the national sheep flock. These conditions are often very painful, and affect the welfare of a significant number of animals. The RSPCA believes it is unacceptable that Animal Health does not routinely record the incidence of these conditions, and publish its findings in the annual report of the CVO. It is a prime example of an outcome-based measure.

FOOTNOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 In April 2007, the State Veterinary Service (SVS) merged with various other bodies involved in overseeing aspects of the livestock farming sector and wildlife, and the resulting agency was named Animal Health.
- 2 www.defra.gov.uk/animalhealth
- 3 Defra (National Statistics) June Survey of Agriculture and Horticulture, published 18 December 2008.
- 4 Source: Livestock Auctioneers Association: www.laa.co.uk and the Institute of Auctioneers and Appraisers in Scotland: www.auctioneersscotland.co.uk July 2008.