Editorial: The Role of EFSA in Animal Welfare

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The latest scientific outputs adopted by the AHAW Panel and published in this issue of the EFSA Journal highlight the essential role of EFSA in animal welfare.

EFSA is in charge of providing scientific advice and scientific and technical support for the Community's legislation, using, whenever possible, risk assessment. EFSA is also responsible for developing methodological guidance on risk assessment.

In this framework, the EFSA Panel on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (AHAW) deals with all aspects of animal health and welfare primarily related to food producing animals at the human-animal-environment interface.

If animal health is a public good that benefits all segments of our society, then animal welfare is another dimension of this public good. Assessing risks to the health and welfare of animal populations serves to protect public health, our environment and the economic benefit we derive from them.

Most commonly animal welfare encompasses how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives. Animal welfare refers to the state of the animal as indicated by scientific evidence. An animal is in a good state of welfare, if it is healthy, comfortable, well-nourished, safe, able to express innate behaviour, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear and distress (OIE, 2011). While ethical, socio-economic, cultural and religious considerations are clearly not part of EFSA’s remit, one should recognise that animal welfare is a complex, multi-faceted issue which includes ethical, socio-economic, cultural and religious dimensions.

The concept of animal welfare is not restricted to the protection and well-being of animals. Welfare of animals has an overall impact on the condition of the animals, including possible implications on animal health and food safety. These aspects have been considered in many of EFSA’s scientific opinions on animal welfare. For example, tail biting in pigs is a major welfare issue and also a risk factor for increased frequency of abscesses and infections in carcasses (AHAW, 2007). On the other hand, the risk of contamination with Salmonella enteritidis might be higher when eggs are produced in non-cage systems because of greater exposure of laying hens and their eggs to environmental contamination (AHAW, 2005a).

Contributing to the development of standards for animal welfare

Decisions of the European Commission on welfare requirements should be based on sound science and appropriate risk assessment and risk categorisation. Scientific opinions of the AHAW Panel are used as a scientific basis for many of the EU legislative measures on animal welfare. For example, Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005\(^2\) on the protection of animals during transport is essentially based on conclusions and recommendations of the 2004 EFSA opinion on the welfare of animals during transport. This opinion has recently been updated (AHAW, 2011) and has contributed to a comprehensive report to the European Parliament proposing additional management options.

Similarly, EFSA opinions on welfare aspects of the main systems of stunning and killing (AHAW, 2004) have led to Council Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009\(^3\) on the protection of animals at the time of killing. Further to this, stunning and killing of fish has been addressed by seven species-specific opinions adopted in 2009, which are expected to support the development of legislative measures for the protection of fish at the time of their killing.

The current EU legislation on animal welfare essentially covers calves, pigs, laying hens and broilers as well as experimental animals; hence, not all animal species are equally protected. The AHAW Panel has performed scientific assessments on the welfare of animal species currently not covered by EU legislation such as rabbits (AHAW, 2005b), farmed fish (AHAW, 2008) and dairy cows (AHAW, 2009). Further work will be needed to update those assessments in light of new scientific evidence, and to develop new assessments in response to risk management demands.

Animal welfare risk assessment methods in a global context

As in other areas, the quality of risk assessment depends on the appropriate formulation of questions for risk assessment, clear understanding of their background, best use of scientific data and expert opinion, and advanced risk assessment methodology applied to address the question at hand.

Since 2004, EFSA has provided scientific advice and technical support to risk managers in the area of animal welfare, from which it has gained a great deal of practical experience in implementing risk assessment methodology on animal welfare. The AHAW Panel has delivered more than 35 scientific opinions advising risk managers on a variety of welfare issues to reduce unnecessary pain, distress and suffering for animals. Based on this experience, in December 2011, the AHAW Panel adopted the Guidance on Risk Assessment for Animal Welfare. This guidance places EFSA at the forefront of the development of risk assessment methodology for animal welfare.

Raising awareness and improving understanding of animal welfare

The AHAW Panel is a unique platform for a multidisciplinary approach to welfare, including expertise on physiology, behavioural sciences, risk assessment, and epidemiology. Many experts with a variety of disciplines and different work experiences have participated in the meetings of the Panel and its working groups.

Although EFSA is not directly involved in carrying out research, the Authority plays a significant role in identifying gaps in data and lack of knowledge on many specific welfare aspects. Recommendations for further research are generally provided in the EFSA scientific opinions, including research needs and priorities identified during the risk assessment process.


Promoting outcome-based indicators for animal welfare

With its work in the area of animal-based measures, EFSA contributes to the objectives of the European Union Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012-2015 (EC, 2012). EFSA is currently carrying out a series of assessments on the use of outcome-based animal welfare indicators and the AHAW Panel has already adopted two scientific opinions, related to pigs and dairy cows respectively.

It is expected that one outcome of EFSA’s current mandates on animal-based indicators is a set of welfare indicators for food producing animals that could be used in future welfare surveillance systems at the European level. Future databases containing animal welfare indicators measurements could give a new dimension to EFSA’s risk assessment work, allowing for quantitative risk assessments.

Operating with all European actors of animal welfare

The creation of a Scientific Network for Risk Assessment in Animal Health and Welfare by EFSA in 2010 fosters harmonisation of animal welfare assessment practices and methodologies in the EU and enhances the exchange of information and data, achieving synergies in welfare risk assessment activities.

Collaboration between EFSA, the European Commission and the Member States in the field of animal welfare is essential. To this end, EFSA actively promotes cooperation with competent scientific/research organisations designated by the Member States in the framework of Article 36 of Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 for scientific and technical assistance and data collection in the preparation of scientific opinions and reports. In addition, EFSA has increasingly involved stakeholders and interested parties through public consultations on draft outputs and technical meetings, thus fostering an integral involvement approach to risk assessment on animal welfare.

REFERENCES


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