

Improved farm animal welfare – added value or a necessity?

August 10 2015, by Jarkko Niemi

Several years ago I started to study an economic issue related to farm animal welfare. Quite soon I realized that this issue can trigger an intensive discussion and receive attention among citizens and in the media. Almost everybody seems to have an opinion on it.

Animal welfare, or lack of it, is debated in the [industrialized countries](#), but not so much in developing countries. Studies indicate that Europeans are interested in knowing more about animal welfare. They are also interested in promoting animal welfare, but it doesn't always show up in food purchases because tradeoffs between animal welfare and money must be made.

Consumers are willing to pay some 10–15% extra for products which have been produced by taking animal welfare into account. In many cases an average consumer seems to be unwilling to cover additional costs caused by animal friendly production, but a subset of consumers are willing to do that. Hence, additional measures are needed to support the markets of animal welfare at large.

How citizens value animal welfare and what they think about it depends on factors such as their cultural background, education, profession and familiarity with [livestock production](#). For instance, there seems to be a discrepancy in views between livestock producers and consumers. Furthermore, consumers are a heterogeneous group and there are different views also between individual consumers.

It may contribute to the discrepancy that animals play a different role for producers and consumers, and hence producers and [consumers](#) have different points of interest. Another contributing factor is that the majority of citizens are not familiar with modern livestock production. There is a lack of knowledge of intensive livestock production practices and lack of understanding of specific animal welfare problems among citizens in Europe.

This is not a surprise because only a small proportion of citizens have a direct contact with animal production. In Finland, agriculture employs only about 3% and the food sector about 2% of labor force. These figures include also non-livestock professionals. In addition, a number of persons are working in other relevant sectors such as advisory and veterinary services, teaching, research and administration, or engaged in organizations which are active in the field of animal welfare.

This doesn't mean that professionals would always know better what is good for animals. However, it means that a lot of people are not always able to put animal welfare into suitable context. Because [citizens](#) receive information on livestock production practices and animal welfare issues mostly from the media, their views may be biased by scandals which receive media attention or by commercial material.

Some issues seem to receive more [attention](#) in the public debate than others. For instance, regulations and public monitoring often focus on measures such as space allowance per animal which are straightforward to verify. Behavioral problems are also highlighted frequently. This refers to the animals' ability to express (or not to express) behavior which is typical to the species.

Animal health is also highlighted as part of animal welfare. It is important because a sick animal is unlikely to feel well, but also because an animal disease incurs extra costs and causes economic losses. In

Finland the livestock sector has invested in mitigating animal diseases and maintaining high level of food safety. The industry has succeeded in this as many contagious animal diseases are either not present in Finland or their occurrence is very low.

Animal welfare is a multidimensional issue and switching from one production practice to another may imply tradeoffs between different aspects of welfare. The role of research in the discussion is to provide information on different aspects of [animal welfare](#). This requires biological research which helps to understand animals. It also requires socio-economic research which helps to understand behavior and incentives of people.

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