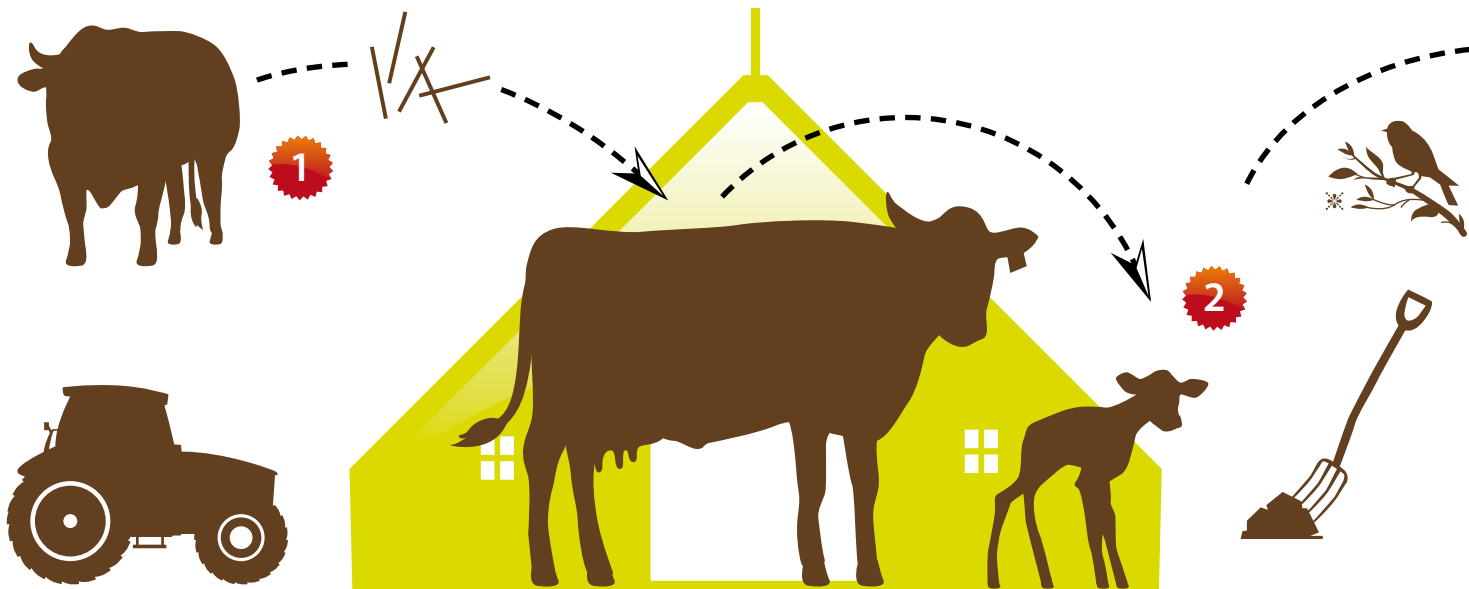


INTERNATIONAL PROTOCOLS DEVELOPED

Animal wellbeing is made visible

The wellbeing of animals on farms all over the world can now be measured objectively, thanks to the Welfare Quality project, led by Harry Blokhuis of Wageningen UR. The meat industry is full of praise for the scientists' work. There is no consensus yet about how the protocol is to be applied in practice. TEXT RENÉ DIDDE ILLUSTRATION KAY COENEN



The wellbeing of farm animals will no longer be measured through strict rules about the size of stalls and cages

or the number of square metres of outdoor space they have, but by using concrete measurements of the physical health and behaviour of cows, chickens and pigs.

Whether an animal is healthy, suffers from heat or cold, or displays aggressive behaviour can for the first time be determined on the basis of clear-cut measurements.

The recently completed Welfare Quality project has come up with a concrete protocol for assessing the wellbeing of animals on farms all over the world. At the centre of this European animal welfare research is Harry Blokhuis, who started as an ecologist with Wageningen UR Livestock Research and now works mainly at the Swedish Agricultural University in Uppsala. Blokhuis was project coordinator for five years and not only maintained contacts with hundreds of scientists, but also drew in various representatives of the agricultural chain.

‘This new system will certainly help to further improve the wellbeing of farm animals’, concludes Blokhuis. ‘It shows up faster and more clearly how a farmer treats his animals than does a set of rules saying that chicken runs must be so many square centimetres in area, or that x many pigs or cows can occupy a four square metre stall. What is more, the farmer gets a push to

tap into his professional skills and innovative drive.’

CAGED CALVES

Animal welfare has become a hot topic all over Europe in recent years, and nowhere more so than in the Netherlands, which is the only country in the world to have an animal welfare party represented in Parliament. And that is not all. Several NGOs have brought out Good Meat Guides which show the consumer at a glance whether meat is ethical. Besides their standard meat products, supermarkets are offering more and more free range and organic meat.

Public disquiet about meat products has been fed by large-scale outbreaks of diseases such as foot and mouth disease, BSE, swine flu and, most recently, Q fever, with all its implications for goat and sheep farmers. Although the size of the farm has no proven relation to the chances of an outbreak of disease, there is a clear relation with the scale of the consequences of such an outbreak. ‘Between them, the agriculture sector and the agricultural sciences have been highly successful in raising food production to a very high level, but they have failed to communicate with consumers about how they have achieved this’, says Harry Blokhuis. ‘If over the years the agriculture sector had stayed more in touch with consumers then we might now have had less

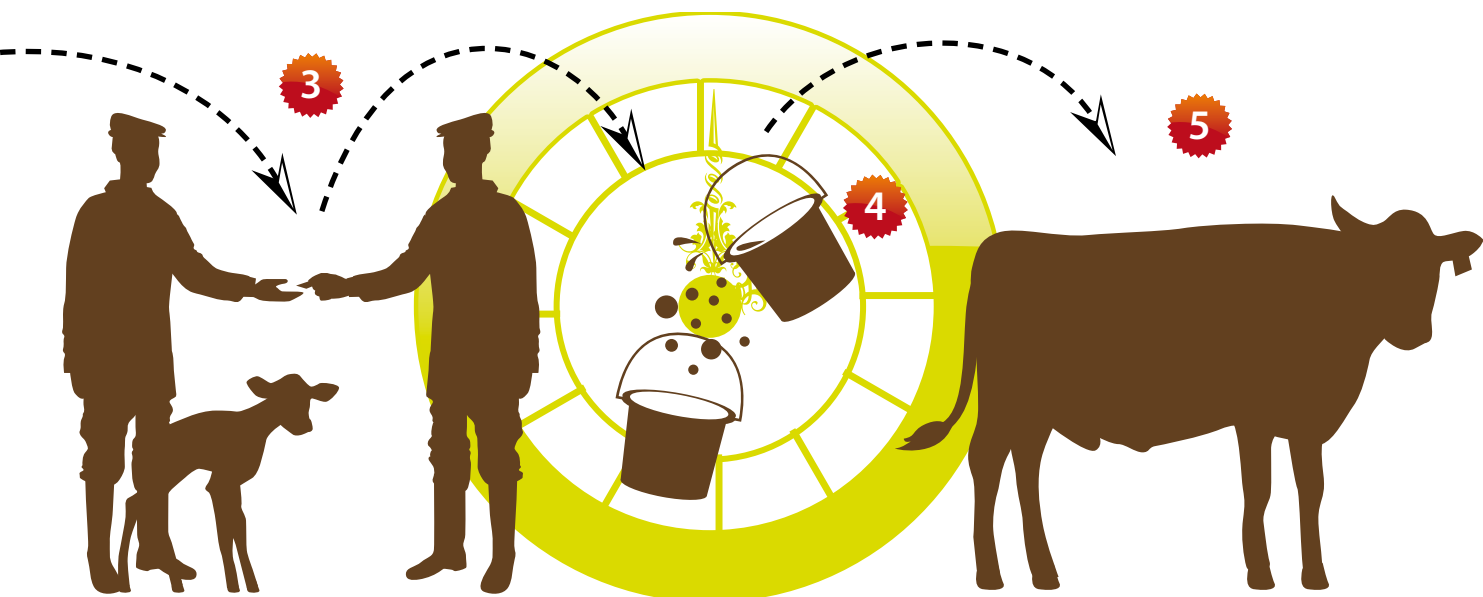


HARRY BLOKHUIS,
Project leader of Welfare
Quality project at
Wageningen UR Livestock
Research

‘It shows up faster and more clearly how a farmer treats his animals’

intensive agriculture and fewer caged calves and battery hens.’

Blokhuis and his associates are now proposing that animals be assessed for hunger and thirst, for comfort levels, and for heat and cold. They will be checked for freedom of movement and the presence of wounds, disease and pain. And finally, their behaviour will be monitored on four points, including whether they display aggressive behaviour, >





HENNY SWINKELS,
Manager at VanDrie Group,
a market leader in veal

‘We can use hard facts to show the reality of the calves’ state of health and wellbeing’

social and positive behaviour, and a good relationship with people. ‘On most points, we were able to establish reliable assessment protocols’, says Blokhuis. ‘We measure hunger by establishing whether an animal is too thin and then using photos to quantify this. We can see when chickens are cold because they huddle together. And on the other hand, if they pant and flap their wings, they are too warm.’ The only thing that is difficult to measure is the ‘absence of

thirst’, so for this inspectors count drinking troughs and check whether animals have access to sufficient water.

BENCHMARK

The system has been tested over recent years on 700 farms and in three species of animal, including calves and chickens in the Netherlands. All the measurements have been fed into a model which calculates the total score for each of the four components: nutrition, housing, health and behaviour. ‘All four components are scored on a scale from 0 to 100’, says the project leader.

A score of over 80 is excellent, 60 to 80 is very good, 20 to 60 is considered acceptable, and under 20 is totally unacceptable. The overall result in the company is also expressed in these terms. ‘To obtain an overall score of ‘excellent’, a farmer has to score at least 80 points on two aspects and 60 on the other two’, explains Blokhuis.

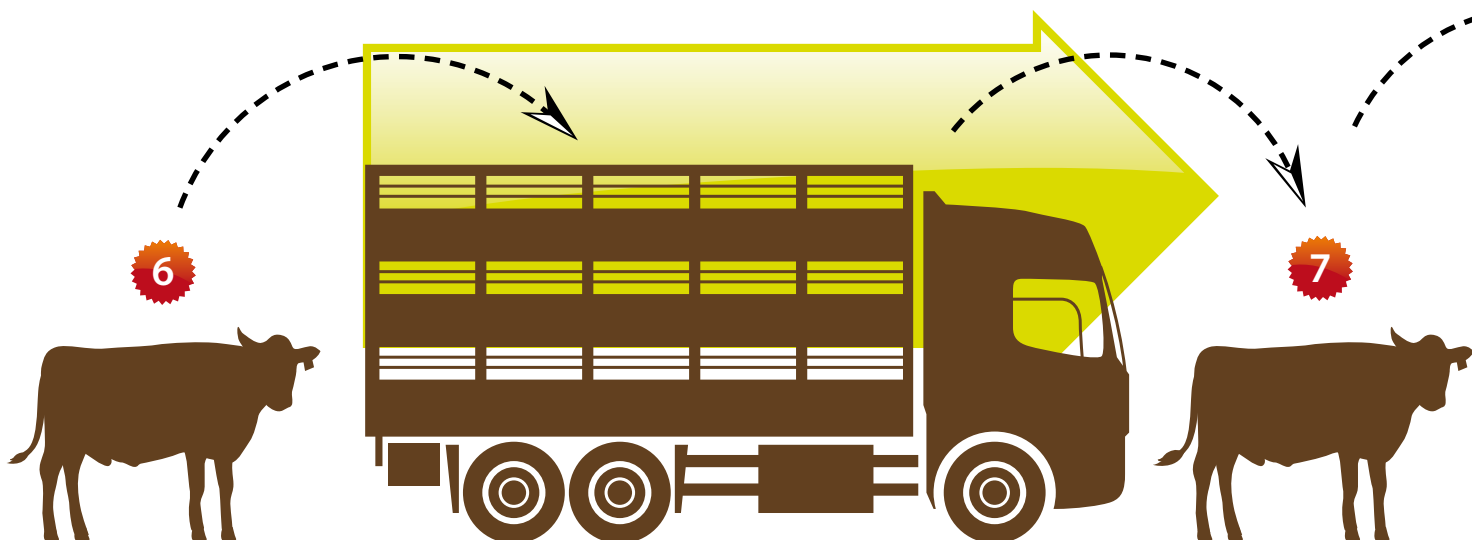
A method like this not only offers farmers and retailers such as Albert Heijn or McDonald’s a benchmark for comparing themselves with each other, but can also form the basis of animal welfare policy. ‘You could for example set the legal minimum at 40 points on all four aspects of animal welfare, and you could set goals such as reaching 50 points by 2020. The protocol could also play a role in the World Trade

Organization (WTO)’, says Blokhuis, who emphasizes that his prime concern is the scientific content of the protocol. ‘What is done with it is basically up to politicians and policymakers. But as scientists we do try to advise and help.’

Policymaker Bart Crijns at the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (LNV) says that there will first be a discussion on the welfare protocol. Crijns: ‘It is a unique and highly reliable system, and it can encourage farmers to be more enterprising. With good management, a farmer with free range chickens in a shed can outdo a farmer whose chickens roam outdoors.’ LNV is going to set up some projects to get farmers working together in practice. ‘We can also integrate the welfare quality measurements into our reporting on “the state of the animal”’, says Crijns. ‘Whether it will become the basis of policy depends partly on what national and international stakeholders think of it.’

BETTER LIFE

The meat-processing industry gives Welfare Quality a vote of confidence too. ‘It is an independent and objective instrument with which we can at last go beyond the rather emotional discussions’, says Henny Swinkels, on the management team of the VanDrie group in Apeldoorn. The VanDrie group is a market leader in the veal trade,



and has one million calves slaughtered per year. In the Netherlands there are 2,400 farms with veal calves. Since early 2009, the VanDrie group has been using the 'Better Life system', with which *Dierenbescherming*, the Dutch animal welfare organization, measures animal welfare on a farm. 'The norms for these calves are far higher than the legal requirements, especially when it comes to blood haemoglobin levels, transport and fodder. None of the calves are anaemic.'

If the system is introduced right across the EU, then regulations based on the Welfare Quality criteria should be possible, according to Swinkels – at least, 'if the sector is given the chance to adapt gradually to the policy goals, and our investments don't turn out to be for nothing.' The Dutch veal sector played a role in testing the Welfare Quality criteria. 'We are now going to use the databases that we built up to look at which parameters get the best results in improving animal welfare. And we're not only going to apply this on the farms but also during transportation and in the slaughterhouses.'

LOGO

Whether or not this work ought to lead to a Welfare Quality logo is not something for the meat sector to decide, says Swinkels. 'We can certainly communicate better and

use hard facts to show the reality of the calves' state of health and wellbeing. The supermarkets and the animal welfare organization will have to look at whether a Welfare Quality logo on meat products will help them to communicate to consumers about animal welfare.'

Albert Heijn thinks it will. 'We're already working with *Dierenbescherming*'s Better Lives label, and I can well imagine that the objective criteria of Welfare Quality could be integrated into that label', says Aldin Hilbrands, product integrity manager with Albert Heijn's parent company Ahold. Hilbrands is responsible for food safety, environmental and social aspects as well as animal welfare for the supermarket's own brands, amongst other things. He is impressed by the Welfare Quality system to and sees it as a sound scientific way of getting an idea of the state an animal is in. But he does have some criticisms. 'I think they've developed a Rolls-Royce when a Volkswagen would have been enough', he says.

Hilbrands thinks it would be a good idea to combine this very thorough protocol with what he calls an 'iceberg indicator': 'By that I mean that we could isolate one or two key factors for which you can say for sure that if a farmer or slaughterhouse scores low on this point there will be a lot else wrong on the welfare side.' Hilbrands believes it must be possible to arrive at a 'top five' set of >

FIVE KEY 'FREEDOMS' FOR ANIMAL WELLBEING

Animal welfare covers the physical and mental wellbeing of animals. It involves five key 'freedoms': freedom from hunger and thirst, from discomfort, from stress and anxiety, from pain, wounds and disease, and from abnormal behaviour. The Dutch government believes that further improvements are needed to the welfare of farm animals, and has even drawn up a Health and Welfare of Animals Regulation to this end, laying down many rules about the keeping, transporting and slaughtering of animals. Caged calves have been forbidden since 2008, rules will come out this year for meat chickens, battery farming will be illegal from 2012, keeping sows in isolation pens will be illegal from 2013. Other important issues in the Dutch livestock sector include: lack of space and boredom among animals, tearing calves away from their mothers at birth, the transportation of calves, Caesareans for cullard cows, castration of pigs, cutting pigs' tails, stunning animals, and transporting them over long distances.





BERT VAN DEN BERG,
Policy officer with
Dierenbescherming

'I think that animal welfare issues can piggyback on other quality criteria such as food safety or environmental ones'

criteria that apply to the six main animal species involved. 'We are going to do more work on this in the European Animal Welfare Platform in the industry, because the current protocol is complicated and expensive. They might have come up with a more straightforward protocol if they had consulted industry and trade parties earlier. It could have been a practical protocol which was linked with the numerous quality controls that farmers and industry already go through in relation to labour conditions, environment and food safety.'

BASELINE MEASUREMENT

Klaas Johan Osinga couldn't agree more with these criticisms. 'Have you seen those protocols?' asks the policymaker from LTO Netherlands, whose responsibilities include animal welfare and involve him in many international agriculture platforms. 'They're like those great big thick university textbooks. If you really want to have an impact on everyday farm practices, it is going to have to be a lot simpler. And it will have to be introduced on a voluntary basis throughout the European Union.' Just like Hilbrands from Ahold, Osinga would have liked to have been involved in developing the Welfare Quality protocol. 'As it is, we have been consulted now and then, whereas it would have been better if we had been partners from the start, if only to ensure

support for improving animal welfare in this sector.'

The LTO representative is also put off by the costs and the paperwork involved. 'Even the baseline measurement takes several hours. Just do the sums: three hours per farm at one hundred euros per hour. There are one million dairy farmers in the European Union. The baseline measurement alone will cost the sector three million euros. Who is going to pay for that?'

EUROPEAN CONSENSUS

If the protocol is introduced, the costs of the assessments will be reflected in prices, thinks Bert van den Berg, a policy officer with Dierenbescherming. As well as its direct and thorough assessment of the animals, Van den Berg feels the Welfare Quality system is at a strategic advantage because almost every EU state was involved in the project. 'Neither scientists, national governments, nor stakeholders can dismiss the system as something another country came up with. There is a Europe-wide consensus.'

Nevertheless, Dierenbescherming also realises that there are some catches when it comes to the feasibility of the comprehensive protocol. 'The assessments take a lot of time and therefore a lot of money', says Van den Berg, echoing the sentiments of LTO Netherlands and Ahold. 'I can picture



WELFARE QUALITY

The Welfare Quality project for improving animal welfare in the food chain ran from May 2004 until October 2009. Forty four research institutes were involved in this programme, among them Wageningen UR. Most of the institutions were European, but a few of them

came from Latin America, Australia and New Zealand. The project was largely financed by the European commission and cost eighteen million euros.

More information:
www.welfare-quality.net/everyone

situations in which only the crucial elements of the protocol would be used. And I also think that animal welfare issues can piggyback on other quality criteria such as food safety or environmental ones.'

According to Van den Berg, there should be a thorough baseline measurement when a farm company is signed up. 'At a later stage it would be enough to test a few key points, perhaps with a random sample', he suggests. And of course if a completely new livestock system is developed, it should be subjected to assessment with the full protocol.

WEBCAMS

Dierenbescherming is waiting to see how things will be developed further – by scientists, by the government, and by the sector. 'Until then we will just carry on with our Better Life label. It is better to have something than nothing', says Van den Berg.

'Dierenbescherming is seen by consumers both at home and abroad as a reliable institution. This means that if we say that animal welfare is satisfactory, it is. After all, we have succeeded in getting calves out of their cages and into groups, and now they get raw fodder.'

Harry Blokhuis agrees that the assessments are very time-consuming. 'We don't yet know exactly how often you need to check. One possible way of saving time and money is to use webcams. That way, human observation is replaced by an electronic analysis of the pictures of the animals. A lot of research is being done on this. We are also looking into options such as 'iceberg criteria' or doing a thorough baseline assessment followed by more limited screening.' Blokhuis is also in favour of integrating the animal welfare protocol with general certification on related themes such as food quality, labour conditions and environ-



ALDIN HILBRANDS,
Product integrity manager
with Albert Heijn Ahold

'I think they've developed a Rolls-Royce when a Volkswagen would have been enough'

ment. In a follow-up project, a number of the bottlenecks that have been pointed out will be scrutinized, and three new kinds of animal will be tested: sheep, turkeys and horses. For the latter two animals, Wageningen UR will be playing a major role. Blokhuis: 'Perhaps we have designed a Rolls-Royce. But it's important to start with a solid basis and then to simplify it. It is more reliable to start with a Rolls and simplify it to end up with a Volkswagen than the other way round.' ■

