Humane livestock farming agreement signed

After a long period of preparation, the Humane Livestock Farming agreement was signed last week. WUR was one of the parties that was asked to provide input. The ministry has also asked animal scientists at Wageningen to obtain a picture of what questions and dilemmas still need to be addressed. Text Marieke Enter

The Humane Livestock Farming agreement is a product of the Animals Act, which was passed last year. It stipulates that livestock farming must be 'humane' by 2040. What that concept entails in practice is set out in the sector plans for the four biggest animal categories: pigs, poultry, cows and (in an as yet unfinished plan) calves. The arrangements are given legal force in what is termed an 'order in council'. A consultation round on this order in council started at the end of June.

WUR is one of the parties asked to provide input. That is quite a tricky position, says Livestock researcher Karel de Greef. 'Our task is to do research and then, based on that, explain the situation for the animals, how they perceive things, how the farmers can deal with that and how to compensate for any deficiencies. We can indicate bandwidths: when do we see signs of positive animal welfare, what values do we find associated with discomfort and at what point could there be damage to welfare or health? But ultimately it is up to politicians to set the norms.'

Political

'What norms to set is a political choice,' agrees animal researcher Fleur Hoorweg, 'but the scientific perspective is still needed to set the right norms. Animals' requirements can't be seen in isolation. Other interests also have to be taken into consideration in the Humane Livestock Farming agreement, such as economic aspects, the practical feasibility and the impact on the environment. It is up to us as animal scientists to work out the consequences for animal welfare of certain policy choices.'

Outgoing Agriculture minister Femke Wiersma (BBB party) called the agreement 'a step in the direction of further improvement without asking livestock farmers to do the impossible'. Animal rights organization Wakker Dier — not a signatory to the agreement — gave a critical response. 'The planned welfare improvements are minimal, the transition periods are too long and the get-out clauses too numerous.' The Dutch Society for the Protection of Animals acknowledges the agreement is not perfect but points out that the new arrangements 'can radically improve the lives of millions of animals.' Humane livestock farming is easier said than done, concluded Wageningen Economic Research (officially Wageningen Social & Economic Research as of January) last autumn in a socioeconomic impact analysis of the agreement.

'Ultimately it is up to politicians to set the norms'

The minister has earmarked 51 million euros for the implementation of the agreement. She is also setting up a Humane Livestock Farming Authority, which will assess the progress in 2028, 2033 and 2038. It is not yet known what form the Authority will take. The same applies to the assessment framework.

One of the agreements is for cows to be put out to pasture more. ◆ Photo *Resource*