

A SUMMARY OF THE ANIMAL WELFARE COMMITTEE REPORT

Evaluating
Future
Legislation

Summarised by
Promar International





AN OVERVIEW

This publication reviews the welfare considerations of animals kept in indoor or outdoor production systems, including cattle kept for purposes of conservation grazing and rewilding.

Indoor systems include a range of housing and accommodation types and animals can be housed continually, i.e. all year round, or housed seasonally, with access to grazing occurring mainly in summer months.

A range of different grazing systems exist in the UK but can be broadly categorised into multi-paddock grazing and extensive grazing. There has been little research on the welfare aspects of multi-paddock or extensive grazing systems, particularly during inclement weather as most of the research focuses on the productivity of the leys and the benefits for soil health and biodiversity.

Some agroecology, regenerative/sustainable agriculture, rewilding and conservation schemes utilise cattle to help manage or restore land and habitats, but can come under criticism if a “hands-off” approach with no human intervention is used.

In some cases, there can be animal welfare concerns if disease outbreaks or poor feed availability (especially in winter) result in suffering, starvation and death. These cattle do not always meet the definition of “farmed” animals and therefore fall outside of the protective legislation. This report calls for the definition to be reworded to include cattle used for conservation grazing or rewilding to ensure their welfare is not compromised.

As with many recently published reviews and opinions, discussion around the increasing impact of climate change and its effect on the industry has been included.

WHAT ROLE DOES CLIMATE CHANGE PLAY?

Climate change is likely to play a role in how cattle are managed in the future, with increased risk of drought and flooding impacting on animal welfare, particularly in grazed systems.

Moreover, the UK and Welsh governments have pledged to become carbon net-zero by 2050, with Scotland hoping to achieve that by 2045. The route that cattle farming will take in the future is uncertain – some may intensify and alter diet/genetics to improve feed efficiency and reduce methane emissions, while others may adopt a more “nature-friendly” approach and consider innovative ways to offset emissions. Either way, there is considerable potential to have welfare implications, if not carried out with due care and consideration.



WHAT TOPICS ARE COVERED?

The document provides a comprehensive review of management elements that impact the health and welfare of animals in all production systems, including stockmanship, feed, water, cow comfort, injury, disease risk, behaviour and mental state.

Some emphasis has been placed on technology, given its near ubiquity, particularly in the dairy industry. While technology has the potential to benefit welfare by informing decision-making, it depends on what it is and how it is used. It still relies on a competent operator and should not replace the judgement of experienced livestock workers.



WHAT WERE THE CONCLUSIONS?

The report concluded that both grazing and continuous indoor-housed systems have welfare benefits when managed well

Grazing systems allow cattle to express normal behaviour and diverse pastures provide them with feed choice. While closer monitoring of feed and water intake and better biosecurity occurs in housed animals.

If poorly managed, there are welfare concerns for both systems – poorer biosecurity outdoors increases the risk of disease and inclement weather can affect grazing behaviours, and pasture quality and quantity. Indoors, it may be more difficult to express normal behaviour and there is an increased risk of bullying in restricted environments.

Traditional systems of winter housing and summer grazing make the best of both worlds

Consideration of the breed and purpose of cattle is also important – for example, high yielding dairy cows may be more suited to indoor systems and native beef breeds may thrive better outdoors.

A principal concern

One concern highlighted in this document is the use of electric “ticklers” in robots. The use of these devices may contravene regulations because it is not always guaranteed that an animal can move forward if a dominant cow is obstructing the exit, causing prolonged and unnecessary pain.

Similar concerns were raised about the use of electronic radio collars in some large extensive grazing or multi-paddock systems. These collars prevent cattle from roaming beyond a “virtual fence” by emitting a noise or shock when the animal gets too close to the boundary. However, there is no legal requirement to record how frequently they are activated and there are concerns that malfunctioning collars may apply repeated shocks until the battery is exhausted. The position of the fence can be programmed remotely which causes concern that it will forego the need for the stockperson to check their stock frequently, which is further likely to lead to welfare problems.

Buildings are no longer fit for purpose

Upgrading or building facilities to meet current welfare recommendations will require significant investment and farmers should be supported where possible through grants or loans. Although investment in housing is not a necessity in extensive systems, good cow tracks are, and putting in place suitable infrastructure to facilitate ease of handling and moving of outdoor-housed animals can be expensive.

A SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Updates to the Code of Recommendations for each of the devolved nations every 5 years

Updates to the legislation surrounding minimal space allowances and requirements for lunging space in cubicle housing

Phasing out of fully slatted cattle housing

Phasing out of tie-stall or tethered systems (except where required for handling, AI, TB testing, veterinary procedures, etc.)

The use of electronic ticklers or trainers in parlours or robots should be reviewed

Welfare outcome assessments for beef animals (cleanliness, body condition, abrasions, lesions, lameness, etc.) should be adopted by all schemes, as it is in the dairy industry

All people with responsibility for livestock should undergo appropriate training in welfare considerations

Welfare of animals in environmental stewardship schemes should not be overlooked when attempting to meet the requirements of the scheme

Multi-paddock grazing systems should consider welfare implications in terms of feed quality/quantity, susceptibility to poaching, and availability of shelter, shade and water

The Codes of Recommendations and Farm Assurance Schemes should promote the principle that animals are free to choose where they wish to lie

Clarification, dissemination and enforcement of the legal requirement to ensure there are enough cubicles in a building for all animals to lie down at once

Requirement for assured farms to maintain 5% more cubicles than cows

Hutches should be sited within shade in summer and in a sheltered, draught-free area in winter

The maximum age at which a calf may be confined individually should be reduced from eight weeks to one week

Individual bull pens should be phased out

It should be recognised that better calf welfare requires several feeds spaced individually through a 24 hour period

The legal requirement for calves to be fed at least twice a day should be tightened by including a maximum time between feeds, e.g. 16 hours

Farmers should be encouraged and supported to invest in adapting or building new accommodation which meets the welfare requirements of modern cows

Guidance should be issued to local councils requiring them to consider animal welfare when making decisions regarding planning, particularly surrounding height and size

Sustainable parasite control practices should be encouraged and promoted

It should be recognised that the transfer of animals between groups/management systems constitutes a significant stressor and should be minimised where possible.

Any imported beef and dairy products should meet the same welfare requirements as UK animals



This is a summary of a recently published 57-page report by DEFRA's Animal Welfare Committee, entitled "Opinion on the Welfare of Cattle in Different Production Systems"

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/962541/awc-opinion-welfare-of-cattle-in-different-production-systems.pdf

If you'd like any further details, or to find out how the [Promar Farm Business Consultancy Team](#) can help you along your animal welfare journey, please get in touch.