Results in Brief

Better welfare for EU farm animals

An EU team examined ways of improving livestock welfare that do not impact the industry’s competitiveness. The researchers concluded that the EU is too heterogeneous for a single policy, although general EU regulations could set a minimum standard.

EU citizens are generally concerned about animal welfare, and most believe that standards have improved during the recent decade. Although 77 % believe that further improvements are possible and necessary, some fear that change may raise costs and disadvantage European farmers.

The EU-funded initiative ECONWELFARE (Good animal welfare in a socio-economic context: Project to promote insight on the impact for the animal, the production chain and society of upgrading animal welfare standards) addressed the conflict. Partners examined policy instruments potentially able to achieve the EU’s Action Plan on Animal Welfare, and that also guarantee the competitiveness of Europe’s livestock
Project research was limited to domesticated terrestrial animals kept for food production, specifically the dairy, beef, veal, poultry and swine chains. Researchers considered animal welfare on farms and during transport and pre-slaughter handling.

The study addressed four key areas. The questions detailed the EU’s current initiatives and their respective strengths and weaknesses. The team additionally examined suitable policy instruments and options for monitoring, as well as the costs and benefits of upgraded standards with respect to international trade.

Results indicate that policy implementation is unlikely to be achieved uniformly across the EU. Various national differences affect the speed and timing of implementation, for example: levels of legislation, price competition, national income, farmer skills and community awareness. The team concluded that new animal welfare policies will be most effective when tailored to particular contexts. However, certain EU-wide options may also contribute.

Researchers concluded that general EU legislation would be important for setting minimum welfare standards, which should be enforced. However, for farms already operating according to best practice, increasing welfare standards will also mean higher costs. Nevertheless, new handling practices may improve both welfare and efficiency.

Results further suggest that the most effective policy initiatives combine multiple goals and instruments. The team called for greater transparency regarding animal products on the EU market, and recommended that an EU-harmonised labelling system would achieve such transparency. Project recommendations address the stages of welfare development, a network of European reference centres and priorities for future research.

ECONWELFARE findings may help EU policymakers raise animal welfare standards.

**Keywords**

Livestock, animal welfare, ECONWELFARE, welfare standards, food production
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