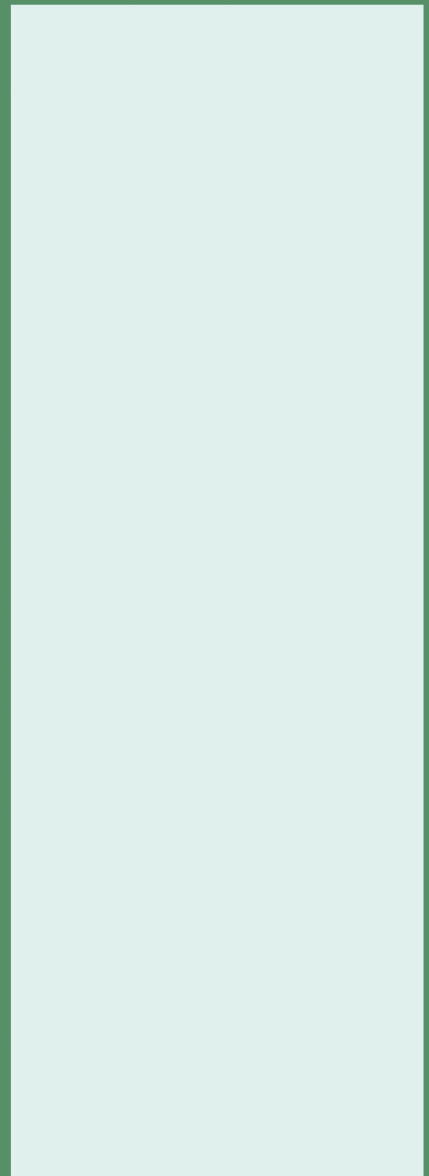


Farm animal welfare — who writes the rules?



British Society of Animal Science
Occasional Publication No. 23

British Society of Animal Science

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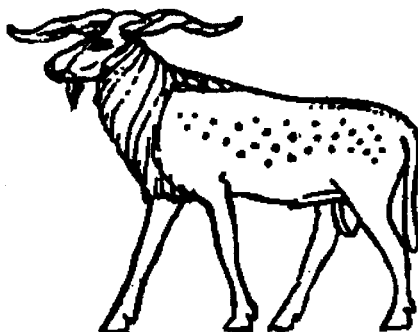
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Inside cover illustration: Ancient Egyptian corkscrew-horned sheep. Beni Hassan ca. 2000 BC (after Griffith, 1896)

FARM ANIMAL WELFARE — WHO WRITES THE RULES?

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Number 23

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technical editors HILARY DAVIES and CAROL WOOLLIAMS

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Foreword

Rules may take various forms. Some are unwritten, some are enshrined in legislation, some in codes of practice and some are part of contractual relationships. Even when they are backed by law, they may not be uniformly enforced, monitoring may not be fully effective and sanctions may vary where failure occurs.

Those who write the rules vary according to the form they take but what is more important is who says what the rules should be.

Within Great Britain, the rules that form legislation for *farm* animal welfare are written by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), as are the MAFF Codes of Practice. But industry groupings also write their own Codes of Practice and the RSPCA has written standards for their 'Freedom Foods' scheme.

Fortunately, there is general agreement that there should be common standards and that deciding what the rules should be cannot be left to the whims of individuals or to interested parties. Different people and groups are bound to differ in their perceptions of what is needed and what is practicable; and there are fundamental differences of view as to what constitutes good welfare for any particular animal, even taking account of its species, size, sex, age and the environment in which it is kept.

The overwhelming need therefore is for an independent, authoritative body, whose membership reflects all relevant interests, to arrive at a consensus of what constitutes good welfare and the conditions required to provide it.

The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) has this responsibility and publishes its findings in reports on sectors of the farm livestock industry.

Many other countries — but not all — have similar arrangements and it makes increasing sense for all these bodies, within and beyond Europe, to liaise closely and to collaborate where this is appropriate. Trade occurs internationally and, ultimately, we shall need internationally agreed rules. It is an interesting question as to who will write those.

FAWC's advice to Ministers may not always result in legislation, even where that is the recommendation and, in many cases, this now has to be EU-wide. Agreement across so many countries inevitably takes time and is likely to be reduced to what can be agreed upon.

Even if the European Union takes a position on welfare, it cannot enforce it outside its boundaries and cannot operate in conflict with international trade agreements. Legislation is thus coming to be seen as somewhat weak and ineffective, difficult to agree upon and to enforce within Europe, unable to apply to imports from outside Europe.

Legislation is necessary to ensure minimum standards but there may be better ways of achieving real welfare improvements.

Ultimate power rests with the consumer. If the product is not purchased, because of the way it is produced, the method of production will change or the producer will go out of business. However, few consumers actually use this power and the economic realities may make it difficult for them to do so.

None the less, public opinion, peer pressure and pressure groups all play a part in bringing about change. The public is entitled to say that certain practices are unacceptable but they are rarely competent to say how things should be changed. That is a responsibility that must genuinely be accepted by those with the necessary knowledge and practical experience.

Increasingly, the major retailers are exerting their enormous power in the direction that they perceive their customers will ultimately want and are imposing welfare standards on their suppliers. They have enormous advantages compared with Government action.

They can work faster, they can impose standards on their sources world-wide, without regard to international trade agreements, they can more easily add welfare requirements to the existing audit trails (for food safety and quality) and they have available severe sanctions. Once having publicly committed themselves, they cannot afford to be caught out and must deal harshly with any supplier who does not conform. The supplier thus risks contract and very likely livelihood.

Fortunately, virtually all of the retailers wish to base their standards on FAWC recommendations, directly or indirectly but, of course, everything cannot be changed overnight. Even where production costs may not necessarily be much increased, some changes may incur large capital expenditure.

But it is surely better to achieve a broad programme of improvement than to weaken motivation by complaining that the ideal cannot be reached in one great leap.

Colin Spedding.

To organize this meeting the British Society of Animal Science (BSAS) has joined with the Scottish Centre for Animal Welfare Sciences (SCAWS).

BSAS wishes to thank the meeting organizers Dr Angus Russel, Dr Colin Morgan, Dr John Savory and Ms Joyce Kent, and to acknowledge support received from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare.

LIST OF DELEGATES

Aitken, Mrs Eileen	Advocates for Animals, Edinburgh
Angus, Ms Lucy	Intervet (UK) Ltd, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire
Appleby, Dr Mike	University of Edinburgh
Ashley, Miss Doranne	Glasgow University Vet School
Avizienius, Mr John	RSPCA, Horsham, West Sussex
Barton Gade, Mrs Patricia	Danish Meat Research Institute, Roskilde, Denmark
Bayvel, Dr David	MAF, Wellington, New Zealand
Birnie, Dr Linda	University of Aberdeen
Black, Dr Murray	BSAS, Edinburgh
Blaney, Mr Ralph	University of Reading
Bornett, Miss Hannah	SAC, Edinburgh
Brooks, Mr N. G.	MAFF, Tolworth, Surbiton, Surrey
Burgess, Ms Diane	The Queen's University Belfast
Calvert, Sheena	SAC, Edinburgh
Carlisle, Ms Ailsa	Roslin Institute, Roslin, Midlothian
Cockram, Mr Michael	University of Edinburgh
Collins, Mrs Judith	SIGNET (c/o ABD, SAC, Edinburgh)
Craig, Mrs Lorna	Deans Farm Ltd, Tring, Hertfordshire
Cross, Miss Deborah	University of Aberdeen
Croston, Mr David	MLC, Milton Keynes
D'eath, Dr Ric	SAC, Edinburgh
Dandrea, Miss Jennifer	University of Nottingham
Darling, Mrs Joyce	BSAS, Edinburgh
Day, Dr John	ADAS Terrington, King's Lynn
Docksey, Miss Caroline	ADAS Terrington, King's Lynn
Don, Mr John	FAWC, Inch, Aberdeenshire
Dwyer, Dr Cathy	SAC, Edinburgh
Dyson, Mr Alan	PIC, Abingdon, Oxon
Edwards, Dr Sandra	SAC, Aberdeen
English, Prof. Peter	University of Aberdeen
Fallon, Dr Richard	Teagasc, Dunsany, Co. Meath, Ireland
Flynn, Mr Mike	SSPCA, Edinburgh
Ford, Ms Rebecca	Advocates for Animals, Edinburgh
Goddard, Dr Pete	MLURI, Aberdeen
Grant, Miss Sheona	University of Aberdeen
Guise, Dr Jane	Cambac JMA Research, Chippenham, Wiltshire
Guy, Dr Jonathan	University of Newcastle
Halls, Mr Lionel	Marshall Food Group Ltd, Newbridge, Midlothian
Harper, Mr Eddie	RHA, Bruton, Somerset
Harris, Dr David	MAFF, Carlisle, Cumbria
Harris, Mrs Judith	MAFF, Tolworth, Surbiton, Surrey
Harris, Mr Tim	Animal Transportation Association, Redhill, Surrey
Haskell, Dr Marie	Roslin Institute (Edinburgh), Midlothian

Hilton, Mrs Bridget	BSAS, Edinburgh
Hinchly, Mr Stuart	Premier Poultry Ltd, Scunthorpe, North Lincolnshire
Hocking, Dr Paul	Roslin Institute (Edinburgh), Midlothian
Hopley, Mr Philip	Grampian Country Food Group, Inverurie, Aberdeenshire
Hosie, Mr Brian	SAC, Edinburgh
Hunter, Mr Richard	Roslin Institute, Roslin, Midlothian
Jagger, Dr Steve	Dalgety Agriculture, Grantham
Jarvis, Susan	SAC, Edinburgh
Jorêt, Mr Andrew	Daylay Foods Ltd, Newark, Nottinghamshire
Kent, Miss Joyce	University of Edinburgh
Kirkwood, Dr James	UFAW, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire
Layton, Ruth	Consultant, Salisbury, Wiltshire
Le Sueur, Miss Caroline	RSPCA, Horsham, West Sussex
Lewis, Miss Megan	Marks & Spencer, London
Lowman, Dr Basil	SAC, Edinburgh
Mann, Miss Jackie	SAC, Edinburgh
Margerison, Dr Jean	University of Plymouth
McGill, Miss Alison	Collier & Brock MSRCVS, Troon, Ayrshire
McPherson, Mr Owen	University of Aberdeen
Metheringham, Miss Jill	Humane Slaughter Association, Wheathampstead, Hertfordshire
Meyer, Ms Kathrin	University of Aberdeen
Milne, Mr Charles	SOAEFD, Edinburgh
Mitchell, Dr Malcolm	Roslin Institute, Roslin, Midlothian
Molony, Dr Vincent	University of Edinburgh
Morgan, Dr Colin	SAC, Edinburgh
Morris, Mr James	Scottish SPCA, Edinburgh
Mylne, Mrs Judith	Advocates for Animals, Edinburgh
Pack, Mr Brian	ANM Group Ltd, Inverurie
Parry, Dr Margaret	Harper Adams College, Newport, Shropshire
Pocknee, Dr Brian	ADAS, Lincoln
Radford, Mr Mike	University of East Anglia, Norwich
Randle, Dr Hayley	University of Plymouth (Seale-Hayne)
Roberts, Dr David	SAC, Crichton Royal Farm, Dumfriesshire
Roberts, Prof. Crad	University of Edinburgh
Roderick, Dr Stephen	University of Reading
Rose, Miss Sarah	Scottish Farm & Countryside, Educational Trust, Royal Highland Centre, Edinburgh
Russel, Dr Angus	SCAWS, Peebles, Peeblesshire
Russell, Miss Alison	BQP, Framlingham, Suffolk
Rutter, Dr Mark	IGER, North Wyke, Okehampton
Savory, Dr John	SAC, Auchincruive
Selwyn-Williams, Mr Nigel	Deans Farm Ltd, Tring, Hertfordshire
Sharp, Mr Malcolm	SAC, Aberdeen
Simpson, Mr Brian	SQBLA, Newbridge, Midlothian
Spedding, Prof. Sir Colin	Chairman FAWC Reading, Berkshire
Speed, Mr Brian	SSPCA, Edinburgh
Speers, Ms Anne	Daylay Foods Ltd, Thornton, Fife
Sprigge, Prof. Timothy	Advocates for Animals, Edinburgh

Steele, Mr Mike	BSAS Secretary, Edinburgh
Stevenson, Miss Julie	SAC, Edinburgh
Stevenson, Mr Peter	Compassion in World Farming, Petersfield, Hampshire
Tappenden, Ms Tracy	Bernard Matthews plc, Norwich, Norfolk
Turner, Mr Simon	SAC, Aberdeen
Walker, Mr Jim	SNFU, Sanquhar, Dumfries & Galloway
Ward, Mr Les	Advocates for Animals, Edinburgh
Watt, Miss Shona	SSPCA, Edinburgh
Webster, Dr Stephen	ADAS Rosemaund, Preston Wynne, Hereford
Wester, Dr Tim	Rowett Research Institute / University of Aberdeen
Why, Miss Helen	University of Edinburgh
Whittemore, Prof. Colin	President BSAS, IERM, University of Edinburgh
Wrathall, Dr Julia	RSPCA, Horsham, West Sussex
Wright, Mr Alan	Press, Thornhill, Dumfriesshire
Wright, Mr Brian	Glasgow University Vet School

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