

## Implementing animal welfare assessments at farm and group level: introduction and overview

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Over the past decade there has been huge growth in the implementation of animal welfare assessments and audits in a variety of animal applications around the world. These include quality assurance programmes for meat, milk and eggs, certification for specialty brands or food-labelling programmes, accreditation of zoos, laboratories and animal shelters, and proofs of compliance with animal welfare standards required by regulatory agencies. Assessing animal welfare in such practical settings poses challenges at many levels. The animal welfare measures chosen for an assessment must be valid, repeatable and robust, and the sampling techniques must provide accurate representations of the overall welfare status of large groups of animals. Animal welfare assessors can come from a range of backgrounds with varying skill levels and experience and need to receive adequate training to ensure reliability. Although automated measures for animal welfare assessments can reduce potential for assessor error and bias, save time and reduce costs they must be sufficiently validated.

The organisers of the 1st International Workshop on the Assessment of Animals at the Farm and Group Level (WAFL) in 1999 recognised the need for sound scientific approaches for measuring animal welfare in commercial settings at a time when practical animal welfare assessments were just emerging (Sørensen & Sandøe 2001). Since then, the (WAFL) workshop has been held every three years, with both the attendance and numbers of submitted abstracts growing with each meeting (Webster 2003; Winckler *et al* 2007; Tuytens *et al* 2009). During planning of the most recent WAFL, it was decided that the international workshop had finally grown into a true

international conference and the 5th International Conference on the Assessment of Animal Welfare at the Farm and Group Level was held for the first time outside of Europe, at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada. There were close to 300 delegates with 36 spoken presentations and 126 poster presentations. With over a decade of experience, animal welfare scientists attending the conference were able to begin reflecting on lessons learned through experience with existing animal welfare assessment schemes, and they could look at the broader aspects of applying animal welfare assessments, for example, the social and environmental aspects. Participants also considered the impacts and benefits of animal welfare assessments on both the human end-users and the animals.

As for previous WAFL workshops, the keynote speakers and a selection of other oral/poster presenters were invited to submit a full paper for publication in this special issue of *Animal Welfare*. The collection published here includes papers on the development of animal welfare measures, the development of protocols, training and implementation of protocols and assessment of risk factors to animal welfare. The full collection of abstracts from the conference can be found in the conference proceedings (Widowski *et al* 2011). We are grateful to all of the anonymous referees and to James Kirkwood and Steve Weddell for providing the opportunity and support to publish this issue. We are also delighted to announce that WAFL 2014 will be held in summer of 2014 in Clermont-Ferrand, France, and will be co-ordinated by Isabelle Veissier, INRA; Local organization: UMR1213 Herbivores, F-63122 Saint-Genès-Champagnelle, France.

## References

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