

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE ROMANIAN FARMERS ABOUT THE FARM ANIMAL WELFARE

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Abstract

The aim of the paper was to quantify Romanian farmers' knowledge of farm animal welfare issues. The survey was carried out on a random sample of 77 farmers in year 2009, based on a questionnaire developed within the framework of the WELANIMAL project (www.welanimal.aku.edu.tr). Regarding the perception of the importance of farm animal welfare and the way this is regulated in Romania and the EU, 66% of the farmers recognize that they do not have an awareness regarding this issue, even though 68% consider that there are some traditions that have a negative impact on it. Among farmed animal species, 54 farmers considered that welfare of dairy cows should be improved the most, followed by laying hens (36 respondents), pigs and beef cattle (19 and 18 respondents respectively). Over 60% of farmers considered that animal welfare receives not enough importance in Romanian's current food and agricultural policy, while 46.7% considered that in the EU the welfare of farm animals is better than in other parts of the world. Out of 77 respondents, 49 believed that the EU legislation satisfies farm animal welfare during transportation, 43 farm animal at slaughter and 40 the conditions under which animals are kept on farms. Two thirds of the respondents stated that they have some training in animal welfare and they apply the existing standards to determine animal welfare. The most often used measurements to determine the level of the animal welfare by farmers were animal health and production (57 and 47 respondents respectively).

Key words: farm animal welfare, Romanian farmers, knowledge

INTRODUCTION

In January 2006, the Commission adopted a Community Action Plan for the protection and welfare of animals for the period 2006-2010 [1]. This Action Plan is in the process of evaluation and reconsidering for the next years.

More recently, the Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force on 1st December 2009, amends the current founding treaties and renames it "The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union" [2]. Title II of the Treaty of Lisbon lists some key principles the Union should respect. Here an Article 13 has been introduced with the Lisbon Treaty. It states that: "*In formulating and implementing the Union's agriculture, fisheries, transport, internal market, research and technological*

development and space policies, the Union and the Member States shall, since animals are sentient beings, pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals, while respecting the legislative or administrative provisions and customs of the Member States relating in particular to religious rites, cultural traditions and regional heritage."

One of the scopes of the new Animal Health Strategy of the European Union [4] is that the concept of animal health covers not only the absence of disease in animals, but also the critical relationship between the health of animals and their welfare. This is also a pillar for the Commission's policy on public health and food safety.

Even though the knowledge of the consumers regarding the farm animal welfare

was assessed previously [3, 5], it was found out that consumers evaluate the current state of animal welfare as rather problematic, while farmers report a more satisfactory evaluation of the present condition of the farm animal welfare [7].

The aim of the paper was to quantify the knowledge *Romanian farmers' knowledge of farm animal welfare issues*. The ultimate purpose is to promote farm animal welfare principles by diffusing more knowledge and promoting public awareness on the specific benefits of farm animal welfare.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The survey was carried out in year 2009, based on a questionnaire developed within the framework of the WELANIMAL project (www.welanimal.aku.edu.tr).

The questionnaire had 25 questions regarding the animal welfare, and 15 demographic questions. A random sample of respondents responded through WELANIMAL project site, or they were personally interviewed by the students of the Banat University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Timișoara.

A total of 77 questionnaires were returned that were complete and were used in this paper. Out of the 77 respondents, 68 were farm owners and 9 farm staff.

From the total respondents 65 declared they have cattle (from 1 to 200 animals), 43 pigs (from 1 to 200 animals), 46 poultry (from 10 to 200 animals), 26 horses (from 1 to 7 animals), 23 sheep (from 2 to 3500 animals), and 8 goats (from 1 to 200 animals). Other 5 respondents declared they have other farm animal species as well.

The results were statistically analysed, without taking into consideration the demographic influence. The questions were divided into three categories: (i) perception of national and European legislation; (ii) application of the existing legislation and standards; and (iii) traditions and beliefs.

Results were presented by means of graphs of distribution of the answers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

(i) Perception of the national and European legislation was found in the answers of five questions of the questionnaire.

To the following question: *"Farmers in your country have a high quality awareness regarding the animal welfare"* had one answer out of two possible "Yes" or "No". About 65.8% of the farmers responded with "No" to this question, while 34.2% responded with "Yes".

In another question the priorities for protection of farm animal species was measured. The question reads as follows: *"In your opinion, from the following list, for which three farm animals should the current level of welfare/protection be improved the most?"*. Out of a list of 15 answers, the respondent has to choose three, according to their opinions. Results are shown in Figure 1. Almost seven out of ten respondents (68.8%) considered that improvement in welfare of dairy cows should be made. Laying hens kept for egg production followed with 46.8% of the respondents' choice. On the third place, pigs are mentioned with 24.7%, followed very close by beef cattle with 23.4%. Calves, horses and sheep come with over 10% of the respondents' options. These results are not consistent with those reported by Eurobarometer in 2007 [6] when the attitudes of consumers were taken into account. Thus, Romanian consumers put on the first place the welfare of pigs that should be improved (56%), followed by laying hens (55%), broilers (53%), dairy cows (50%), and beef cattle (35%). The other farm animals are mentioned with percentages from 22 to 28%.

Another multiple answers questions to relieve the perception of the Romanian farmers of existing legislation was: *"From the following subjects related to the welfare/protection of animals, please indicate the ones for which you believe European Union legislation exists"*. The possible answers were: 1. the transport of farm animals, 2. the slaughter of farm animals, 3. the conditions under which animals are kept on farms and 4. don't know. Results are presented in Figure 2. Two years after accession to the European Union, Romanian farmers consider, in proportion of over 50%, that there is legislation for all the three subjects suggested. This is very obvious because the EU legislation came into force after accession in 2007. Results are somehow

in contrast with those published by the Eurobarometer in 2007 [6], where 32% of the consumers responded they do not know to answer to this question. Also, the level of people that are aware about the European legislation increased for each subject.

Regarding the knowledge of the level of farm animals protection or welfare in the EU compared to other parts of the world, the answer to the question: "Within the European Union do you believe that the welfare/protection of farm animals is: 1. better than in other parts of the world, 2. worse than in other parts of the world, 3. about the same as in other parts of the world, 4. don't know" showed over seven out of 10 respondents considered that this is at least the same or better than in other parts of the world (Figure 3). Only 8% of the farmers considered that in the EU the welfare of farm animals are worse than in other parts of the world, while a rather high percentage of respondents had no knowledge about this subject.

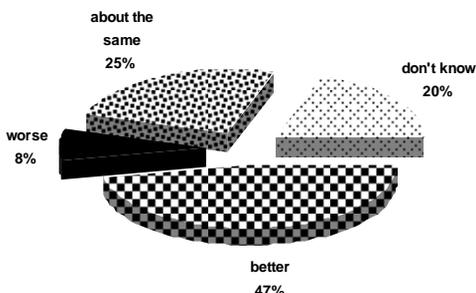


Figure 3. Within the European Union do you believe that the welfare/protection of farm animals is...than in other parts of the world?

At what level the farmers know the Romanian policy regarding the animal welfare/protection was assessed through the following question: "In our country's current food and agriculture policy, do you believe that animal welfare/protection receives...?".

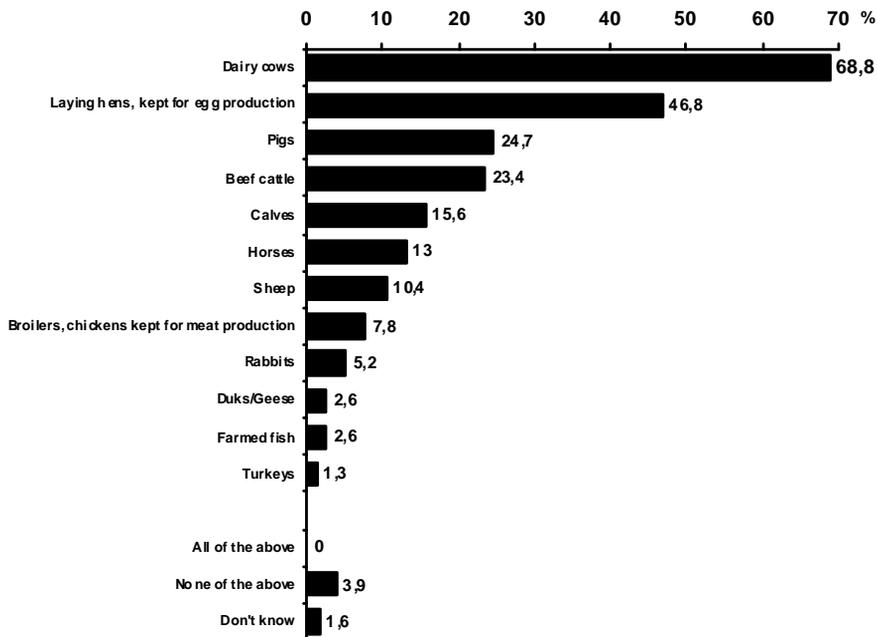


Figure 1. In your opinion, from the following list, for which three farm animals should the current level of welfare/protection be improved the most?

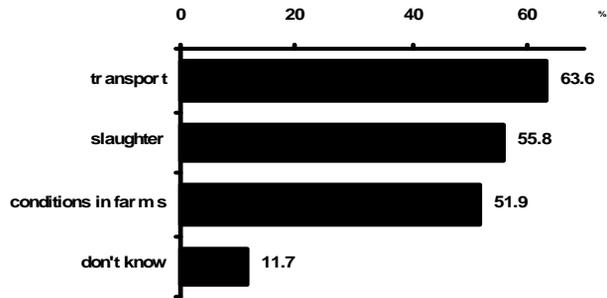


Figure 2. From the following subjects related to the welfare/protection of animals, please indicate the ones for which you believe European Union legislation exists

The respondents had to choose only one answer from the following options: 1. too much importance, 2. not enough importance, 3. just about the right level of importance, 4. don't know. Results are presented in Figure 4. In spite of the fact that Romania have to comply with the EU legislation regarding the animal welfare and protection, 62% of the respondents considered that this issue is not getting enough importance from our authorities, while 24% considered that this issue receives the right level of importance. These results show the lack of communication of the Romanian authorities the legislation and policy regarding the farm animal welfare and protection.

Results obtained in this study comply with those reported earlier by the Eurobarometer, 2007 [6].

(ii) Application of the existing legislation and standards at the farm level is revealed in answers to another four questions.

The first two questions referred to use the new technologies that are more animal friendly by the Romanian farmers. The questions reads as follows: *“Do you have the willing to adopt new breeding methods instead of the traditional ones, in case your scientists argue that traditional methods cause pain and stress to animal?”* and *“Do you have the willing to adopt new slaughter methods instead of the traditional ones, in case your scientists argue that traditional methods cause pain and stress to animal?”*.

Both questions offered the possibility to give only one answer that could be “Yes” either “No”. As it is shown in Figure 5, eight out of ten Romanian farmers would adopt new breeding methods and seven out of ten farmers are willing to adopt new slaughter methods, in case scientists declare there is less stress and pain involved for animals.

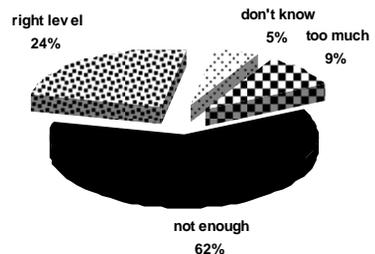


Figure 4. In our country's current food and agriculture policy, do you believe that animal welfare/protection receives...importance?

On the question: *“What are your reference standards for determining animal welfare?”* 47 farmers out of 77 responded they use existing standards, while 28 respondents use their own standards (Figure 6).

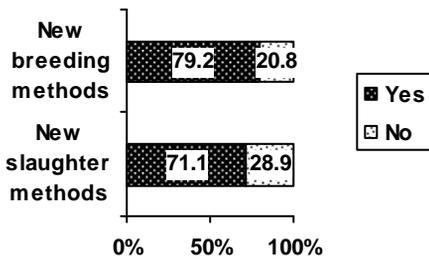


Figure 5. Do you have the willing to adopt new breeding/slaughter methods instead of the traditional ones, in case your scientists argue that traditional methods cause pain and stress to animal?

To find out what measurements are used by farmers in order to determine the high level of farm animals' welfare, they were asked to answer the following question: "What measurements do you use to determine that a higher level of animal welfare is indeed reached?". The farmers had the choice to give multiple answers from the following options: 1. Health status, 2. Easy to handle, 3. Animal behaviour, 4. Body condition, 5. Productivity, 6. Other. Seventy four percent of the farmers (57 out of 77) considered that health status of animals is the best measurement of the high level of animal welfare (Figure 7), followed by productivity (61%).

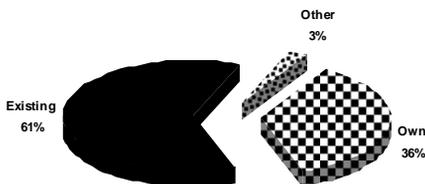


Figure 6. What are your reference standards for determining animal welfare?

Animal behaviour was chosen by 37.7% of the respondents as being an important measurement for welfare level of farmed

animals, while easy handling and body condition were the option of about 25% of respondents (26% and 27.3%, respectively).

(iii) Regarding the **traditions and beliefs** of the farmers connected to the farm animal welfare, they were asked to respond by "Yes" or "No" to four questions. Results showed that two thirds of respondents consider there are some customs and traditions having a negative impact on farm animal welfare. Over 80% of farmers give names to animals and believe animals have sentiments. Furthermore, 91% of the respondents consider that higher quality products could be obtained from 'happy animals' (Figure 8).

CONCLUSIONS

Results of this study shows that in year 2009, 65.8% of the farmers do not have an awareness regarding the animal welfare, but 63.8% consider that in the EU exists legislation regarding the transport of farm animals related to their welfare or protection. Also, about half of farmers consider that in the EU the welfare of farm animals is better than in other parts of the world, but in Romania this issue receives not enough importance.

Romanian farmers are open to new methods of breeding and slaughter animals in order to reduce animal stress and pain, and consider that health status and productivity are the most important measurements of the welfare status.

Two thirds of Romanian farmers consider some traditions and customs have a negative impact on animal welfare. Finally, the majority of Romanian farmers give name to animals and believe that animals have sentiments.

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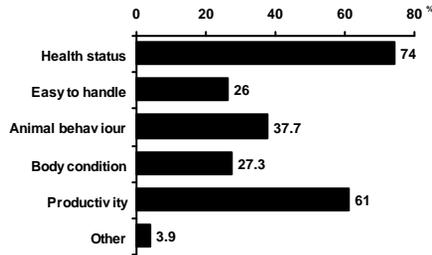


Figure 7. What measurements do you use to determine that a higher level of animal welfare is indeed reached?

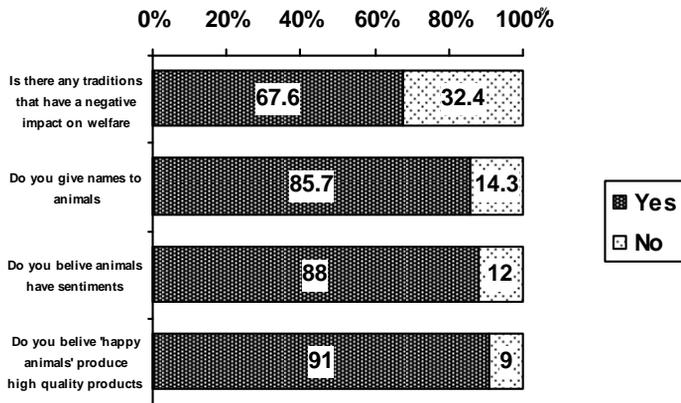


Figure 8. Results regarding the traditions and beliefs of Romanian farmers related to farm animal welfare

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