

Farm assurance schemes

The role of the veterinary profession

The veterinary profession has a key role to play in informing and educating the public with regard to the value and provenance of animal derived food. As such, BVA has a responsibility to assist members to understand different farm assurance schemes and to signpost the public, in a professional and ethically justifiable way, towards those that promote higher animal health and welfare.

What are farm assurance schemes?

The UK is a world leader in animal health and welfare standards, considered to be one of the top four countries globally.¹ UK Farm Assurance schemes play an integral role in supporting the implementation of these high animal health and welfare practices and standards. In their *Brexit: farm animal welfare* report, the EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee of the House of Lords recognised the role of farm assurance schemes in supporting high animal welfare, calling upon the Government ‘...to encourage, and where possible facilitate, uptake of farm assurance schemes across the UK.’²

Farm assurance schemes enable customers, as citizens, to make sustainable and ethically informed choices about the food products they buy and the impact of these products on animal health and welfare.

Assurance schemes allow producers to demonstrate that their food products, both animal and non-animal derived, have met specific, independently certified standards at each stage of the supply chain from ‘farm to fork’. These standards include, but are not limited to, animal health and welfare, food safety, stockmanship training and competencies and environmental

¹ World Animal Protection (2014) *Animal Protection Index*. Available at: <http://api.worldanimalprotection.org/>

² EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee, (2017) *Brexit: farm animal welfare*. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldeucom/15/15.pdf>

protection. Farm assurance schemes look to promote high animal health and welfare through encouraging good husbandry and animal management processes.

The veterinary profession carries out an important and multifaceted role in the development, implementation and continuous review of farm assurance scheme standards. Veterinary professionals are involved across the farm assurance process, from establishing and evaluating the standards that farm assurance schemes require, to developing veterinary health plans with farmers to promote compliance and facilitating cost-effective stockmanship and husbandry practices.

Animal welfare

BVA believes that animal welfare relates to both the physical health and mental wellbeing of the animal, as encapsulated by the five welfare needs set out in the UK Animal Welfare Acts:

- the need for a suitable environment
- the need for a suitable diet
- the need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- the need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- the need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Any consideration of food animal production systems, both in agriculture and aquaculture, must take these principles as a starting point.

Statutory species-specific welfare codes of practice provide a legal basis for the care of farmed animals, in addition to voluntary codes of practice and voluntary assurance schemes. These codes encourage high standards of husbandry and are developed based on the latest scientific evidence, best practice in husbandry and meeting the five welfare needs of livestock as outlined above.

Welfare outcome assessment

BVA recognises that from an animal health and welfare point of view, it is not sufficient to carry out a tick-box exercise in terms of inputs. BVA supports welfare outcome assessment in

assurance schemes as a tool to drive continuous improvement of animal management and husbandry practices, in turn promoting high animal health and welfare. The standardised assessment of welfare outcomes provides a practical and scientifically informed method of assessment that aims to provide a more objective, accurate and direct picture of animal welfare. Indicators of positive welfare should be incorporated in to welfare outcome assessments when possible, as promoted by the Farm Animal Welfare Committee (FAWC)'s "good life" framework. Behavioural opportunity for animals can be a key differentiator between some assurance schemes, which is linked to the potential for good animal health and welfare when delivered with excellent health and welfare outcomes.

A welfare outcomes approach also contributes to informed considerations of the advantages and disadvantages of different production systems, assisting producers and consumers to consider how well a production system holistically meets all of an animal's health and welfare needs. It is important to avoid oversimplification when considering how different production systems address animal health and welfare needs and recognise that welfare outcomes are not solely dependent on the type or size of different production systems.

Ethical and budgetary considerations

Public goods, such as animal health and welfare, have no explicit value in terms of market prices and so the market cannot efficiently allocate resources to them. BVA recognises that improved animal health and welfare standards can result in an increased cost to the producer/farmer, which must be recovered either through the marketplace and/or through public money being allocated to animal health and welfare as public goods. BVA's Brexit report 'Brexit and the veterinary profession' argues that animal health and welfare should be recognised as a public good and receive financial government support; for example, through a Welfare Stewardship scheme.

BVA believes that there is ongoing work to be done in communicating the value of improved animal health and welfare, and of assurance schemes in achieving this, to producers, farmers, citizens, retailers and others, so that the links between investment, good health and welfare outcomes (for animals and farmers) and economic returns are understood. Engaging

consumers as informed citizens will help ensure their spend can be better directed towards animal products which align with their own ethical and budgetary priorities.

Individual priorities

For individuals considering their own approach to the selection of animal derived products, there will be a number of individual priorities that will be important to them; as such BVA and the veterinary profession's role is to highlight important considerations relating to animal health, welfare and environmental stewardship to assist with purchasing decisions. Whilst these priorities are considered within the context of UK farm assurance schemes, as principles they can also be held up against farm assurance schemes in the international arena:

- **Lifetime assurance** – BVA believes that all farm assurance schemes should cover the health and welfare of the animal from birth to slaughter, known as 'farm to fork'. Whilst all farm assurance schemes play an integral role in promoting higher standards of animal health and welfare, we believe that all animals should have a good life from point of birth, as well as a humane death.
- **Welfare at slaughter** – BVA believes that all animals should be stunned before slaughter, and as close to the point of production as possible. If slaughter without stunning is still to be permitted, then any meat or fish from this source must be clearly labelled so that consumers can fully understand the choice they are making when purchasing such products. Consumers should consider whether the scheme requires pre-stunning, and what requirements, if any, there are in relation to transport to slaughter.
- **Veterinary involvement** – Expert input and advice from the veterinary profession in the development, implementation, and continuous review and improvement of farm assurance schemes is crucial to the value of those schemes in terms of animal health and welfare, public confidence, and producer/farmer buy-in. Consumers may wish to consider whether the scheme is independently certified, underpinned by veterinary expertise, and committed to continuous improvement.
- **Behavioural opportunity** – The ability to perform certain behaviours can be important for achieving good animal welfare, and frustrating highly motivated behaviour can result in compromised welfare. In production systems where behavioural opportunities

are reduced, there are often trade-offs with other welfare and production outcomes. On-farm welfare outcome assessment is important in assuring that systems are balancing the ability to perform important behaviours with good health outcomes. Behavioural restriction is an important concern for many consumers.

- **Responsible use of antimicrobials and other medicines** – BVA strives for responsible prescribing and responsible use of veterinary medicines across the profession, industry, and in the wider context of One Health. A reduction in the use of antimicrobials in animals can be achieved through improvements to animal health and welfare via disease prevention strategies, including improved animal husbandry and management. Consumers are encouraged to consider whether the scheme supports responsible use of antimicrobials, and what requirements are incorporated to help prevent the need for prescribing.
- **Animal health and biosecurity** – biosecurity and measures taken to prevent the spread of disease amongst animals, humans and their surroundings are a crucial contributor to the high animal health and welfare of farm animals, as well the UK's biosecurity and food safety as a whole. Consumers are encouraged to consider how the scheme promotes effective biosecurity measures and the reduction of disease risks, in collaboration with a veterinary surgeon.
- **Approach to sustainability and the environment** – consumers are encouraged to explore how the scheme incorporates elements of environmental stewardship, such as carbon footprint and conservation of biodiversity.