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Animal welfare regulations – same, same but different?

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Animal welfare regulations often have a purpose of preventing and identifying risks of poor welfare, i.e. focusing on risk assessment. This is one of the reasons why regulations often contain more input (resource- and management-) based requirements than animal-based requirements. So how much can we actually use different regulations when it comes to animal welfare assessment and surveillance?

In a recent Swedish study the animal welfare legislation and a number of private standards for dairy cows were analysed for content, structure and actual control outcomes. The result from this study showed that even if the requirements were quite similar the control outcomes differed substantially. One reason for this was that compliance with similar requirements could be measured in different ways. A resource-based requirement could be controlled using both resource- or animal-based measures, and this could be done at an individual or at a herd level. There were also differences with respect to the focus of the various regulations. Arlagården´s most common type of non-compliance was dirty cowsheds, which mirrors their focus on food safety and hygiene. Dirty cowsheds was a rare non-compliance during the official control, which instead had dirty dairy cattle, i.e. an animal-based outcome, as the most common non-compliance. Furthermore, more problems concerning claw health was detected during the Arlagården controls than the official controls, which may be a result of the advisory company Växa Sweden carrying out the Arlagården controls. Växa has been working actively with problems around claw health and lameness in dairy cows.

There appears to be a general consensus within international farm animal welfare research that the most common and severe welfare problems for dairy cows are mastitis and lameness, rather than dirtiness. However, non-compliances related to mastitis and lameness were rarely recorded during controls. One reason for this can be that it is most often not considered a non-compliance to have a sick or injured animal, as long as it is under treatment. Another reason may be that mastitis and lameness is not mentioned per se in the regulations, in contrast to dirty animals. A regulation mainly consists of minimum levels, which means that compliance with a regulation does not necessary guarantee a good welfare or absence of welfare problems. Since the main purpose of a control is to checking for compliance and not measuring animal welfare per se this means that control statistics do not necessary mirror the actual animal welfare level in a region or country but reflecting the focus of the regulations. It could also be questioned if dirty animals don't deserve more attention by researchers and advisory organisations since it is the number one welfare problem according to control statistics.

Is the high prevalence of dirty cattle the result of this focus in the regulations, or are the generally large problems with mastitis and lameness a result of too little focus on these problems in the regulations? In any case, we can conclude that control statistics can to some extent be used to detect health and welfare problems, but in its present form will certainly not give the whole picture.