

Section 7



Animal Welfare

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Introduction

Animal welfare is concerned with the wellbeing of the animal and can be studied through observations of animal behaviour and physiology. Animal welfare complements the objectives of beef assurance schemes that demonstrate the production of safe beef to consumers and food-chain stakeholders through welfare-friendly management practices. Good farm animal welfare is an integral part of Irish beef farming which is largely grass-based and extensive. Irish agriculture and Irish farmers operate to a very high standard of animal welfare. Animal welfare is strongly regulated in Ireland through the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine (DAFM) cross-compliance inspection system, which all Irish farmers have to comply with.

- ① How will I achieve best animal welfare practices in my herd?
- ② What are the most important environmental requirements of farm animals to attain optimal welfare?
- ③ What measures can be used on farms to assess animal welfare?
- ④ What is the role of the stockperson in ensuring optimum animal welfare?

Animal Welfare

1 How will I achieve best animal welfare practices in my herd?

The concept of the 'Five Freedoms and Provisions' (Farm Animal Welfare Council www.fawac.ie) is a guide to achieving best animal welfare practices:

Freedom from hunger and thirst - providing fresh water and the right amount of feed to keep animals healthy.

Freedom from discomfort - making sure that your animals have the right kind of environment, including shelter and somewhere comfortable to rest.

Freedom from pain, injury and disease - preventing your animals from getting ill and making sure that animals are diagnosed and treated rapidly should they fall ill.

Freedom to express normal behaviour - making sure that your animals have adequate space and proper facilities.

Freedom from fear and distress - making sure that animals' conditions and treatment avoid mental suffering.

2 What are the most important environmental requirements of farm animals to attain optimal welfare?

The main environmental requirements of farm animals are comfort, security, hygiene and freedom to perform behaviours.

Comfort	Thermal - neither too hot nor too cold. Physical - a suitable resting area. Space for grooming, limb-stretching and exercise.
Security	of food and water supply, from death or injury due to predation, aggression, floods etc. from fear of predation or aggression.
Hygiene	to reduce the risk of disease, to avoid the discomfort of squalor.
Behaviour	to permit coping behaviours, to allow animals to acquire security through experience and adaptation to the normal sights and sounds of farm activity.



3 What measures can be used on farms to assess animal welfare?

In general, two broad categories of parameters can be used for practical welfare assessment on-farm.

“Environmental” parameters:

These are specific standards for housing and management systems.

Housing standards include, for example, adequate space allowance, feeder space, number and flow rates of drinkers, floor types, etc. Husbandry and management standards may include such factors as specific ages and/or techniques for castration and processing, and appropriate training for stockpersons.

“Animal-Based Parameters”. These include measures of the animals' reactions or responses to the production system. Cow replacement rate, herd fertility indices and calf survival indices (in breeding herds); Bodyweight-for-age (average daily gain) for the breed, cross or gender; Body condition scores (BCS); Records of deaths; Veterinary treatments; Incidence of disease and injury.

4 What is the role of the stockperson in ensuring optimal animal welfare?

The stockperson is key to ensuring optimal animal welfare. Specific stockpersonship skills may be developed on-farm, working with an experienced person, or by following a course offered by a suitable training organisation. Wherever possible, the training should lead to formal recognition of competence. Without competent, diligent, stockpersonship animal welfare will be compromised.

Checklist



A competent stockperson should be able to:

- Recognise whether or not the animals are in good health. Signs of ill health include: loss of appetite, listlessness, cessation of cuddling, discharge from eyes or nostrils, dribbling, persistent coughing, lameness, swollen joints, scouring, rapid loss of condition or emaciation, excessive scratching, abnormal skin conditions or other unusual conditions.
- Understand the significance of a change in the behaviour of the animals.
- Know when veterinary treatment is required.
- Implement a planned herd health programme (e.g. preventative treatments, vaccination programmes if necessary).
- Implement appropriate animal feeding and grassland management programmes.
- Recognise if the general environment (indoors or outdoors) is adequate for the promotion of good health and welfare.
- Have management skills appropriate to the scale and technical requirements of the production system.
- Handle animals with care, avoiding undue stress.

Footnote

Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council (FAWAC)
The Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council (FAWAC) was established in 2002 as an advisory body to the Minister (DAFM), bringing together, for the first time in Ireland, representatives of the principal stakeholders from animal welfare organisations, farming bodies, Government Departments (North and South), the veterinary representative body and representatives from education and research. The FAWAC provides a valuable forum, bringing together a diverse range of interests and enabling representatives to meet, exchange divergent views and reach consensus on the broad mandate of challenges facing farm animal welfare. All members have a common purpose and share the view that animal welfare is an issue of very high importance. It has been particularly successful in publishing a series of welfare guideline booklets across a wide range of animals and activities which can be found on the website www.fawac.ie

Herding

- Daily routines should be carried out calmly and consistently with the aim of accustoming the animals to the normal sights and sounds of farm activity. Farm animals have a natural fear of novelty. Once the sights and sounds become routine, animals acquire a sense of security.
- A good stockperson will individually inspect all animals at least once per day. Particular categories of animals will require more frequent inspection, e.g. young calves or cows in late pregnancy.
- Formal training and/or experience working under the supervision of a competent stockperson is strongly recommended where inexperienced persons are taking over responsibility for animal husbandry on a farm.
- Common veterinary activities (e.g. dosing, injecting, and castration) should not be attempted without direct appropriate supervision until the stockperson is competent to carry out these activities.
- Stockpersons already involved in animal management/ husbandry should keep themselves updated in technological developments that can prevent or correct welfare problems.

Handling of animals

- Animals must be handled with care and patience. When restraint is needed it should be minimised in degree and duration. Particular care is needed in handling the calving cow and the newborn calf. Care in handling of bulls is of utmost importance, particularly from the operators' safety viewpoint.

