

An authorisation procedure for mass-produced farm animal housing systems with regard to animal welfare

Beat Wechsler*

Swiss Federal Veterinary Office, Centre for Proper Housing of Ruminants and Pigs, FAT, CH-8356 Tänikon, Switzerland

Abstract

In 1981, an authorisation procedure regarding animal welfare was introduced in Switzerland for mass-produced housing systems and equipment for farm animals. When asking for an authorisation, the manufacturer or importer of a housing system or equipment must send detailed documentation (plans, measures, technical data) to the Federal Veterinary Office. The authorisation can only be given if the housing system or equipment is in accordance with the requirements of the Swiss animal welfare legislation. Whenever possible, a decision is made on the basis of literature or experience with similar equipment. In some cases, however, practical tests are required. Such tests may include veterinary, physiological, and behavioural measurements to assess animal welfare.

Authorisations are given by the Federal Veterinary Office. It may consult an advisory board which consists of experts in animal husbandry, animal housing construction, and animal protection. Over the last 23 years, more than 1300 authorisations were given, and 16 applications were rejected. The manufacturers may appeal against a decision of the Federal Veterinary Office. To illustrate the authorisation procedure and the indicators used to assess animal welfare, five examples of testing of housing systems or equipment are given.

In conclusion, pre-testing of farm animal housing systems that are intended to be mass-produced is a promising way to increase and ensure product quality from livestock systems.

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1. Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, intensive housing systems became more and more popular in animal production. The animal was considered as part of a production system. Housing systems with minimum space require-

ments and minimum labour input were preferred. As a consequence, sows were housed in crates and fattening pigs in barren, fully slatted pens. Calves were reared in individual pens and bulls for beef production on concrete slatted floors. As regards laying hens, the battery cage became the most widespread housing system.

Since the 1980s, however, consumer demands concerning animal welfare play an increasing role in animal production. Nowadays, it is widely accepted

* Tel.: +41 52 368 31 31; fax: +41 52 365 11 90.

E-mail address: Beat.Wechsler@fat.admin.ch.

that animals have behavioural needs. Housing systems and management should meet these needs to safeguard the welfare of the animals. Consequently, the quality of an animal product is not only defined by its appearance and its taste, but also by the housing conditions of the animals.

There are several ways to meet these consumer demands and to adapt production standards with regard to animal welfare. In many European countries, label production accounts for an increasing portion of total animal production. By choosing products of a given label, for example, free-range eggs, the consumer can also make a choice for a certain type of housing system. In addition to label production, changes in national and international animal welfare legislation have set new standards for animal production. A recent example is the new EU directive for laying hens (1999/74/EC). According to this directive, conventional battery cages will be phased out by 2012.

A third way to improve housing conditions is to test mass-produced housing systems for farm animals from an animal welfare perspective. Such authorisation procedures already exist in Sweden, Norway and Switzerland. In Germany, facultative testing of housing systems is proposed by the national animal welfare legislation (Menke et al., 2002); in Austria, the parliament has decided in 2004 to introduce a compulsory pre-testing procedure for new mass-produced housing systems and equipment. Testing of mass-produced housing systems has two major advantages. First, it focuses on housing systems that will affect the welfare of a large number of animals. Second, it is flexible and hence able to react within a short time to new developments in animal production. Changes in animal welfare legislation often take much more time.

The aim of this paper is to describe and illustrate the Swiss authorisation procedure for mass-produced housing systems and equipment. Based on 23 years of experience, it is shown that such an authorisation procedure is suitable to ensure animal welfare in livestock production and hence to improve product quality.

2. Testing of farm animal housing systems in Switzerland

In 1981, an authorisation procedure (pre-testing) regarding animal welfare was introduced in Switzer-

land for mass-produced housing systems and equipment for farm animals (Wechsler and Oester, 1998). In Article 5 of the Swiss Animal Welfare Act, it is stated that “mass-produced housing systems and equipment for the keeping of animals for purposes of profit may not be advertised and sold without prior authorisation from a service designated by the Federal Council”. The authorisation can only be given if the housing system or equipment is in accordance with the requirements of the Swiss animal welfare legislation (Wechsler and Oester, 1999). The principles of the Swiss Animal Welfare Act are listed in Article 2. It is stated that “animals shall be treated in the manner which best accords with their needs”, that “anyone who is concerned with animals shall, in so far as circumstances permit, safeguard their welfare”, and that “no one shall unjustifiably expose animals to pain, suffering, physical injury or fear”. Article 1 of the Swiss Animal Protection Regulations contains general statements about housing conditions. It is stated that “animals shall be kept in such a way as not to interfere with their bodily functions or their behaviour, or overtax their capacity to adapt”, and that “feeding, care and housing shall be deemed suitable where, according to existing experience and the state of knowledge concerning physiology, animal behaviour and hygiene, they comply with the animals’ requirements”.

The authorisation procedure applies not only to complete housing systems such as cages, boxes, or crates but also to equipment with which animals frequently come in contact (e.g. feeding and watering systems, slatted floors, cubicle partitioners, tethering arrangements, nest boxes). When asking for an authorisation, the manufacturer or importer of a housing system or equipment must send detailed documentation (plans, measures, technical data) to the Federal Veterinary Office.

Whenever possible, a decision is made on the basis of literature or experience with similar housing systems or equipment. In some cases, however, practical tests are required. Such tests may include veterinary, physiological, and behavioural measurements to assess animal welfare. Two research stations have been established by the Federal Veterinary Office for this purpose. Housing systems for cattle, goats,

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