VETERINARY IRELAND

POLICY DOCUMENT
ON
INTENSIVE LIVESTOCK FARMING
2024

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CONTENTS

BACKGROUND

Intensive animal farming is a form of agriculture that is focussed on keeping large numbers of animals at high stocking densities, in order to maximise the scale and efficiency of production, whilst minimising costs.

Over many decades there has been a drive in the developed world, including the EU, towards increasingly intensive methods of livestock farming – this has led to the disappearance of smaller farms in favour of larger, more automated, industrialised ones. Such intensive industrialised livestock farming inevitably results in close confinement and limited living space. Although many farmers are concerned for their animals' health and welfare, the nature of intensive farming often means that the impact on the welfare of the individual animal is considered only in terms of possible effects on animal health and the consequent ability of the animal to attain its maximum production rate of meat, milk or eggs.

Whilst intensively farmed animals may enjoy good welfare, there is now substantial evidence that many intensively farmed animals suffer poor welfare while being pushed to the limits of their productive capacity. The rights of animals to freedom from pain, fear and distress, and the freedom to express natural behaviours, are well recognised, in both legislation (Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013) and in national guidance documents (Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council Guidelines). However, the conditions in which intensively farmed animals are kept may prevent the expression of many natural behaviours and can accentuate behaviour that causes pain, injuries and disease. There are generally far fewer stockkeepers working with these animals and hence much less frequent interactions and monitoring of animals, thus increasing the risks to the welfare of the animals.

The rearing of animals in confined spaces (farrowing crates, gestation crates, veal crates, rabbit cages, layer cages, quail cages, etc.) has become increasingly controversial and on the 10th of June 2021 the plenary session of the European Parliament, by an overwhelming majority, voted in favour of a resolution requesting the EU Commission to introduce legislative proposals to ban the use of cages in animal farming by 2027. The principal points of the resolution were that alternatives to cage farming exist and should be encouraged and that the ban must be based on impact assessment and with a species-by-species approach.

All animals, whatever their purpose, are entitled, at a minimum, to "lives that are worth living, i.e. lives where they can and do avail themselves of opportunities to have positive experiences" (Mellor, 2016)[1]. Of necessity this document points to the potential welfare issues arising as a result of intensive livestock farming but it also aims to offer solutions with the hope that all agricultural animals will, in the future, have not just a life worth living but a lifetime experience where "the balance of salient positive and negative experiences is strongly positive" (Mellor, 2016)[1]. Veterinary practitioners can work with farmers and advocate for the supports, including financial supports, necessary for farmers to make the changes that will ensure a better lifetime experience for our agricultural animals.

PRINCIPLE AREAS OF CONCERN

1. BROILER CHICKENS

Normal Behaviour

- Live together as a flock with a distinct hierarchy or pecking order and much social interaction.
- Spend their day foraging for food, scratching the ground looking for insects and seeds.
- Tend to range widely, using the cover of trees and vegetation for safety from predators.

Intensive Environment and Husbandry

- Kept in large, artificially lit sheds in overcrowded conditions (this is based on weight per unit area - currently up to 39kg of chickens per square metre is allowed in Ireland) (European Commission, 2007)[2] with minimal environmental enrichment and no access to the outdoors.

Welfare Issues Arising

- Ability to express many natural behaviours, such as exercise, foraging, dustbathing and perching, very restricted or completely absent.
- Health problems including:
    - breast, hock and foot lesions due to dermatitis from contact with wet or damp bedding, high in ammonia and nitrogenous compounds, that is corrosive to the chickens' skin.
    - respiratory and cardio-vascular diseases.
    - lameness and breast muscle myopathies due to the incredibly fast growth rate of modern breeds of chicken. Many of these chickens reach slaughter weight less than 5 weeks after birth.
- Welfare issues associated with transport to abattoirs, including traumatic injury during catching.
- Overcrowding and potential smothering due to the practice of placing a high number of birds in sheds and routinely 'thinning' by removing heavier birds early for slaughter. Even though remaining lighter birds are not caught, they suffer stress due to the presence of catchers and associated disturbance.

Welfare Friendly Solutions

- Use of higher welfare breeds (resulting in slower growth rates, birds that are more active & inquisitive, have greater plumage coverage and fewer skin lesions, etc.).
- Housing that is adequately insulated and ventilated and equipment that minimises water leakage, to ensure that poultry bedding is as dry as possible throughout the life of the chicken.
- Access to outdoor runs during the day to allow the opportunity to express natural behaviours like foraging, scratching, and perching in fresh air and natural sunlight. This results in better leg and heart health and a significantly higher quality of life.
- Provision of greater space per bird and indoor environmental enrichment (straw bales, pecking objects, natural light).
- Ceasing the practice of thinning as a routine production procedure.

A critical aspect of the provision of such welfare-friendly solutions is the creation of precise, auditable certification before terms like 'free-range' can be applied to labels. Veterinary certification should form a critical support to the health and welfare aspects of such audits.

2. LAYING HENS

Normal Behaviour

- As for Broiler Chickens.

Intensive Environment and Husbandry

- In the EU, battery hens are kept in so-called enriched cages. These cages must provide a minimum of 600 cm2 of usable space per hen (this is smaller than a sheet of A4 paper), nesting, littering, perching & claw-sharpening areas (European Commission, 1999)[3].
- While enriched cages provide more space than battery cages and can allow hens to express some of their natural behaviours such as perching, dustbathing, and nesting, they are still very restrictive. Hens cannot fly up to a high perch to be safe from feather pecking, the litter area is often limited, and effective dust bathing is not possible.
- Intensively reared hens are more likely to attack each other by pecking and damaging each other, particularly in the vent area. Laying hens have their beaks trimmed (a third of the upper beak is removed, creating a painful nodule at the tip of the remaining portion of the beak) - this discourages the hens from pecking and thus reduces the risk of them damaging each other.
- Battery hens are prone to parasite infestations e.g. red mite infestations.
- Several tiers of crowded cages make inspection difficult, and in large cage sheds injured birds may often die unnoticed.

Welfare Issues Arising

- These caging systems still largely prevent normal behaviour such as wing-stretching, grooming, dustbathing, flying, foraging, undisturbed resting and nesting.
- The inability to display these behaviours leads to some birds feather plucking and may cause outbreaks of vent pecking.
- Beak-trimming causes pain and prevents birds from expressing natural behaviour.
- The large level of egg production depletes the hens' stores of calcium and, in combination with restricted movement, can result in high levels of osteoporosis (brittle bones) and fractures.

Welfare Friendly Solutions

- Cage-free indoor systems, housing layers on the floor of a barn or aviary.
- Free-range systems with full outdoor access from the age of four weeks, as well as continuous access to adequate indoor housing providing at least 0.17 sq. meters per laying hen in order to facilitate freedom of movement and the expression of natural behaviours (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, 2020)[4].
- Phasing out of beak-trimming. Beak trimming is banned in Scandinavia and Germany.

As with broiler chickens, the creation of precise, auditable certification, including health and welfare certification by veterinary practitioners, before terms like 'free-range' can be applied to labels is critical.

3. PIGS

Normal Behaviour

- Pigs are intelligent and inquisitive animals with rooting behaviour as part of their natural repertoire - used to investigate & manipulate items in their environment and to gather food.
- Live in small social groups with dominance behaviour leading to a stable hierarchy - aggression and fighting are rare.
- Require low stocking densities and environmental stimuli to fulfil their natural behaviours. Dams construct a nest and create a suitable environment to farrow in.

Intensive Environment and Husbandry

- Most pigs in Ireland are kept in industrial intensive conditions; they are kept indoors all year round, at the highest legally allowed stocking densities and with minimal or no environmental stimuli. This also applies in most of the EU although the Nordic countries are making progress in moving away from industrial pig farming. Farming with improved welfare for pigs can be done by implementing appropriate management and husbandry changes and still ensuring that enterprises remain economically viable. However, current market conditions dictate that subsidies are necessary to enable some welfare changes - for example, Finnish pig farmers are heavily subsidised to enable provision of free farrowing conditions for sows and to maintain pigs with intact tails.
- Shortly before they give birth, sows are moved to a farrowing crate. This is similar to a sow stall except that there is space to the side for the piglets. Bars keep the sow out of the piglets' lying area to prevent crushing.
- Following abrupt weaning at approximately four weeks of age, pigs are kept in barren, overcrowded environments where they cannot exhibit normal behaviours. This is normally on bare slatted floors, without straw for bedding or rooting (a normal behaviour). These pigs have no access to outdoors and will never experience fresh air or daylight. Many buildings have suboptimal ventilation systems with resulting risk of heat/cold stress and high levels of ammonia predisposing to respiratory disease. Pigs are unable to behave naturally and become bored and frustrated. They tend to fight and to bite each other, sometimes causing severe injury, particularly to their tails. (Tail biting has many causes but boredom and frustration are highly significant ones.)

Welfare Issues Arising

- Prolonged hunger in sows and boars associated with lack of adequate dietary fibre. Suckling piglets may also suffer prolonged hunger and thirst due to excessively large litter sizes if farrowing house management is poor.
- Restricted ability to display normal behaviours – leading to frustration and resultant, abnormal repetitive behaviours such as bar-biting. These are known as stereotypies and are indicative of mental distress.
- Overcrowding can lead to increased levels of disease, aggression, reduced pig comfort, poor hygiene with pigs lying in their own waste and increased levels of vices such as tail, ear and flank biting.
- Pressure injuries associated with hard lying surfaces and trauma, including decubital ulcers in sows and bursitis and calluses in pigs of any age.

- Painful husbandry procedures such as tail docking, undertaken to limit tail biting. Ireland, along with many other EU countries, is not compliant with the EU Pig Directive on this, and most pigs are tail docked routinely. Tooth reduction, if performed incorrectly, can also lead to short or long-term pain.
- Production diseases of sows such as chronic lameness.
- Production diseases of fattening pigs, particularly respiratory diseases.
- Poor management at weaning leads to stress, aggression and post-weaning diarrhoea with resultant high levels of antimicrobial use and other effects such as increased tail biting.

Persistence of many of these problems appears to be associated, in part at least, with lack of enforcement and failure to change the management practices and culture within the pig industry. It is notable that approaches that can be used to mitigate or solve many of the problems above are known and relevant EU legislation is already in place to address them in many instances.

Welfare Friendly Solutions

a) Indoor systems

- Pigs are kept in groups at lower stocking densities with separate areas for urination & defecation and where at least part of the floors are solid, with straw or other manipulable material for bedding and rooting. Although there is no access to the outdoors, there is greater opportunity for natural behaviour, free movement within the pen or shed, less crowding, conflict, boredom and tail-biting. Deep bedded systems allow foraging and comfort but adopting such systems would involve a radical change from current practice in Ireland, requiring complete re-purposing of all buildings and sourcing of adequate bedding materials. Provision of adequate manipulable material for enrichment, improvement of current housing systems and other measures to prevent tail-biting are more realistic short-term objectives if commercial pig production in Ireland is to continue.
- Transition to systems where pigs' tails remain intact must occur and will involve assessment of on-farm risk factors and adoption of farm-specific measures that may include dietary changes, provision of adequate enrichment materials, prevention of post-weaning diarrhoea, increasing space and genetic selection.
- Sows may still give birth in farrowing crates to protect the piglets for the first vulnerable period of their lives. However, it should be noted that good research data to guide the use of free farrowing are now available and countries such as Finland have largely adopted free farrowing systems.
- Improving genetics to reduce prolificacy (more longevity for the sows, lower piglet mortality).
- Housing conditions, including ventilation, must be optimised to prevent high levels of ammonia and detrimental effects on respiratory health. Provision of correctly formulated diets and adequate feeding space for each production stage is essential to ensure freedom from hunger and aggression. Adherence to good mixing practices including ensuring good pen design, good feeding and general management. There has been considerable research in this area and practices such as co-mingling litters before weaning, mixing sows on solid flooring initially and other changes which are not costly to implement can be made to reduce aggression and fear.
- Where deemed essential following rigorous risk assessment, blunting of the sharp tip of teeth using grinding (as opposed to tooth reduction) must be conducted by well-trained staff.

b) 'Outdoor' systems

- Sows are kept outside with straw-filled huts for shelter: this is where they will give birth to their piglets. There are no sow stalls or farrowing crates. Hence, they have a higher quality of life and are able to act naturally by building nests, rooting, wallowing and foraging. The piglets benefit from the free-range conditions until they are weaned. At weaning, the piglets can be either taken indoors and reared in extensive conditions or allowed to spend around half their lives outdoors. These systems work best in a relatively dry climate and thus are unlikely to be suitable for some regions in Ireland.
- Use of alternative, hardy pig breeds rather than those that have been bred for use in intensive systems.
- Note: There is no clear set of legal standards that would permit use of the term 'free-range' on pork products. This is badly needed. Audits of standards, including veterinary certification of health and welfare claims, should be introduced.

4. DAIRY CATTLE

Potential Welfare Issues Arising

The dairy sector in Ireland is mainly based on seasonal grazing and winter housing which is less intensive than the indoor-only model common in continental Europe. However, there are two particular areas of concern, outlined below.

a) Expansion

A 38% increase in cow numbers since 2013, with equivalent increase in herd sizes and the associated intensification, frequently without provision of the necessary infrastructure and in combination with labour shortages, is causing the following issues to arise: -

- Overcrowded and/or poorly designed indoor housing on slatted systems, absence of comfortable lying positions and mixing of groups leading to increased aggression, bullying behaviour and inability to express normal behaviours.
- Use of outdoor cubicles and yards with no indoor space, so that cows have no shelter and no clean or dry place to lie.
- An increase in infectious diseases such as the following – cryptosporidiosis, coccidiosis, bovine respiratory disease, TB and mastitis.
- Lameness due to walking on uneven surfaces for longer distances because enlargement of herds requires cows to graze further away from milking parlours.
- Reduced grazing space, thus exposing animals to increased parasite burdens.
- Inadequate welfare monitoring and decreasing husbandry standards.
- Contract rearing of calves leading to mixing from different herds and increasing the risk of spread of infectious diseases.
- Concentration of calving into a 6-week period, putting extreme pressure on infrastructure and labour resources, predisposing to poor husbandry and infectious diseases.
- Male dairy calves of limited commercial value predisposing to poor on-farm welfare, increased mortality rates and transport stress.

b) Zero grazing

This involves cattle being kept indoors all year, feeding on either cut grass or silage. This potentially increases the risk of lameness, mastitis and injuries as well as being completely at odds with the normal grazing behaviour of ruminants. Cows are often housed in sub-optimal indoor housing on slatted systems with inadequate lying space that was not designed for all year use.

Welfare Friendly Solutions

- Good quality, professionally designed housing with adequate space per animal, separate lying & feeding areas and appropriate ventilation.
- Use of technologies such as health monitoring devices on cows to assist with welfare monitoring.
- Use of automatic calf feeders that mimic natural feeding and additionally monitor health data.
- Maintaining farm roadways with even surfaces, free of potholes and debris, and encouraging positive handling methods when moving animals.
- Housing cows in groups based on calving dates to minimise unnecessary mixing after calving and thus reduce hierarchical challenges & related stress.
- Development of bespoke herd health and breeding plans based on veterinary advice.
- Use of sexed semen to reduce the production of dairy sired male calves.
- Veterinary certification of health and welfare standards should be introduced.

5. BEEF CATTLE

Intensive beef farming in Ireland is generally associated with feedlots. Feedlots are areas where cattle, having been raised on pasture, are held in groups in close confinement while being fed a grain-based ration. Up to 20% of the cattle slaughtered in Ireland each year come from feedlots.

Potential Welfare Issues Arising

- Bovine respiratory disease (84% of illness in feedlot cattle) due to stress and exposure to infectious viruses and bacteria.
- Lameness due to abrasive surfaces, muddy pens, laminitis and “bulling” behaviour.
- Poor detection of sick or injured animals due to crowding in pens and limited stockperson monitoring.
- Digestive disorders, including acidosis and other health problems, due to the high-grain diet.
- Abnormal behaviours, indicative of distress, such as self-grooming, bar licking and head butting.

Welfare Friendly Solutions

- Good quality, professionally designed housing with adequate space per animal, separate lying & feeding areas and appropriate ventilation.
- Once cattle have been sorted into even groups at arrival, further mixing should be avoided to prevent the stress of changing social hierarchies.
- Provision of enrichment media such as cattle brushes.
- Veterinary certification of health and welfare standards should be introduced.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. BROILER CHICKENS

- Use of higher welfare breeds.
- Provision of adequately insulated, ventilated and equipped housing.
- Access to outdoor runs during the day to allow the opportunity to express natural behaviours.
- Provision of greater space per bird and indoor environmental enrichment.
- Cessation of the practice of thinning.

2. LAYING HENS

- Cage-free indoor systems on the floor of a barn or aviary.
- Adequate space (at least 0.17 sq. meters per laying hen).
- Free-range systems with full outdoor access and continuous access to adequate indoor housing.
- Phasing out of beak trimming.

3. PIGS

a) Indoor systems

- Lower stocking densities on part-solid flooring or deep bedded systems.
- Optimisation of ventilation.
- Provision of adequate manipulable material for enrichment.
- Assessment of on-farm risk factors and adoption of farm-specific measures to reduce tail-biting.
- Free farrowing of sows.
- Reduction in prolificacy.
- Adherence to good mixing practices.

b) 'Outdoor' systems

- Sows kept outside with straw-filled huts for shelter.
- Sows giving birth in these shelters with no sow stalls or farrowing crates.
- Weaned pigs reared indoors in extensive conditions or, where possible, 50% outdoors.
- Use of alternative, hardy pig breeds.
- The creation of a clear set of legal standards that would permit use of the term 'free-range' on pork products.

4. DAIRY CATTLE

- Good quality, professionally designed housing with adequate space per animal, separate lying & feeding areas and appropriate ventilation.
- Use of health monitoring devices on cows.
- Use of appropriately designed automatic calf feeders.
- Maintenance of farm roadways and use of positive handling methods.
- Housing of cows in groups based on calving.
- Development of bespoke herd health and breeding plans based on veterinary advice.
- Use of sexed semen.

5. BEEF CATTLE

- Good quality, professionally designed housing with adequate space per animal, separate lying & feeding areas and appropriate ventilation.
- Avoiding mixing of cattle once social groups have been established.
- Provision of enrichment media such as cattle brushes.

6. VETERINARY CERTIFICATION

- Standards of animal health and welfare in all forms of intensive livestock production, particularly where specific claims are made, must be audited and must include veterinary certification.

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