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## Animal welfare - a threat or an opportunity for research, farming and trade

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### ABSTRACT

Animal welfare is becoming increasingly recognised as an important component of the quality assurance guarantees sought by both domestic and international consumers of primary products of animal origin. Consumers are being influenced by "conscience factors", rather than cost, and are now moving to take a "conception to consumption" interest in farming and abattoir practices and the associated animal welfare standards. Perceptions of New Zealand's welfare and husbandry practices thus play an important role in favourably positioning products in premium-priced international markets. It is important to be able to sustain, both scientifically and ethically, the New Zealand approach to animal welfare. This is especially important where New Zealand practices differ or even conflict with the practices of trading partners. In a market-responsive economy, these consumer preference trends highlight the need to present New Zealand's produce as grown in a welfare-conscious, environmentally sensitive, sustained-yield manner.

**Keywords:** Animal welfare, trade, research, farming practices, codes of practice, legislation.

### INTRODUCTION

At the 50th Annual Conference of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production held in Wellington in 1990, the then Minister of Agriculture identified the strategic importance of animal welfare thus (Sutton, 1990):

"The opinions of non scientists about agriculture's treatment of animals can no longer be disregarded . . . We need to learn that we cannot ignore the potential market consequences of changes in attitudes towards animal welfare . . . Animal welfare is important to New Zealand and there needs to be a wider realisation of the serious harm that could be done to the entire country if there was any major breakdown in our standards or practices.

At the least, our image and reputation could be damaged, not for now but for future generations and, at worse, we could lose important markets."

Three years on, both the range of papers presented at this 1993 Conference and the interest demonstrated, by conference attendees and the media, reinforce the significance of these comments.

At a seminar held in Wellington in December 1992, the current Minister of Agriculture advised (Falloon, 1992):

"I wouldn't want to overestimate or underestimate the importance of animal welfare but I think significantly one of my first experiences as a Minister was to meet a number of European Parliamentarians whose first question was 'What are your laws relating to animal welfare?' Their second question was 'What are your laws relating to sustainability?' I think these two issues are going to be the issues for us in the nineties".

This presentation seeks to take note of significant trends, both locally and internationally, and identifies both threats and opportunities in the separate areas of research, farming and trade.

### FUTURE PROSPECTS

The impact of animal welfare and animal rights thinking presents a major change management challenge. This can perhaps be best addressed by considering three simple future scenarios:

#### Scenario 1 (No Change)

In this scenario, both the farming and scientific communities adopt a defensive posture and reject the need for modification of existing animal use practices.

It is likely that this scenario would lead to increased confrontation with animal activist groups, local consumer rejection of certain animal products and the very real possibility of animal welfare being used as a non tariff trade barrier.

#### Scenario 2 (Abolitionist Option)

In this scenario, an extreme animal rights position would prevail and the use of animals in science, agriculture and recreation would be prohibited.

#### Scenario 3 (Managed Change)

In this final scenario, animal welfare concerns are noted, debated and changes implemented, when an appropriate societal consensus is reached.

The principles of Replacement, Reduction and Refinement (the 3Rs of Russel and Burch, 1959) continue to be followed by the scientific community.

Within agriculture, changes are underpinned by relevant scientific data, and the industry's commitment to quality management and quality assurance systems provide the guarantees sought by both domestic consumers and international trading partners.

## ANIMAL WELFARE TRENDS AND RESEARCH

The introduction of the Animals Protection (Codes of Ethical Conduct) Regulations in 1987 ensured that New Zealand has an internationally recognised set of controls governing the use of animals in research.

This system will be continued in proposed new animal welfare legislation (MAF, 1990; MAF, 1991) and the research community is currently involved in the drafting of a Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes.

The principles of the 3Rs have widespread support and the involvement of external members on Institutional Animal Ethics Committees has ensured public confidence in the New Zealand system.

The availability of relevant research data is critical to the formulation of valid policy positions and in international debate regarding the acceptability of farming practices unique to New Zealand.

For those activities of a "public good" nature it is important to note that animal welfare has now been identified as a "cross output priority theme" (MORST, 1992).

The user pays principle applies to "industry benefit" research of a more applied nature and it is encouraging to see industry groups such as the Game Industry Board, the Pork Industry Board and the Meat Research and Development Council playing an ever increasing role in animal welfare research funding.

The recent decision by the Agricultural and Marketing Research and Development Trust to fund a Chair in Animal Welfare Science at Massey will provide additional impetus on the research and teaching front. Following the establishment of the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology, the Foundation for Research Science and Technology and the Crown Research Institute structure, MAF also sees a need to commission "operational research" to assist in policy formulation.

Animal welfare science has certainly come of age and provides an excellent example of the benefits of a multi-disciplinary approach to research, with behavioural science, agricultural science, veterinary science, physiology, psychology and social science all having important roles to play.

It is also important to note the increasing preparedness of the scientific community to actively debate the ethical considerations involved with new technology (Campbell, 1990) and the use of animals in agricultural and veterinary science (Rollin, 1991; Leow, 1987; Roe, 1989).

## ANIMAL WELFARE TRENDS IN FARMING

The shift from being production-driven to being market-responsive has ensured that animal welfare is now seen as a strategically important "market signal".

Animal welfare and issues of food safety, including chemical residues and microbiological considerations, are seen as important aspects of product quality. The consumer interest in the management and humane slaughter of stock from "conception to consumption" has provided the opportunity to consider the benefits of farm quality assurance programmes.

Such programmes have been initiated in the United Kingdom, in recent years, and provide a means of ensuring effective implementation of agreed industry standards such as welfare codes of practices. The recent local initiative taken by the Food and Beverage Exporters Council and the Trade Development Board is an example of the type of commitment being made by an industry sector clearly focused on premium-priced, sophisticated overseas markets.

Quality management principles are based on the concept of ongoing quality improvement. It is envisaged that these improvements will be incremental in nature and based on scientific validity and practicability.

In proposed new animal welfare legislation (MAF, 1990; MAF, 1991), it is intended that animal welfare codes of practice will have enhanced legal status and will be revised every 3-5 years, to reflect changes in scientific knowledge and management practices. Most importantly, however, these codes will be the product of extensive consultation with animal user groups and other interested parties. The various codes will, thus, be a realistic representation of societal consensus at any one point in time and will also take careful note of relevant international standards.

The economic benefits of "good animal welfare practice" are receiving increased attention and recognition and were the subject of a recent seminar organised by the Centre for Agricultural Strategy within the Faculty of Agriculture and Food at the University of Reading, entitled "It Pays to be Humane" (Carruthers, 1991).

## ANIMAL WELFARE TRENDS AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE

In addition to MAF, a number of other Government agencies monitor international trends of significance to New Zealand's export of primary produce. The Ministry of External Relations and Trade, the Meat Board, the Trade Development Board and political posts in Bonn, Paris and London have all identified changing animal welfare attitudes as a matter of increasing strategic significance.

The main focus of interest has been in Europe, due to the harmonisation of European Community (EC) standards, leading up to the establishment of the single European market in 1993. These standards, in the form of EC directives, tend to take careful note of any previous recommendations made by the Council of Europe's Standing Committee on the Convention for the Protection of Animals Kept for Farming Purposes. All EC member countries are signatories to this document.

During 1992, New Zealand gained official observer status on this standing committee and was able to provide input to, and comments on, draft recommendations prepared in respect of sheep and goats.

A number of important EC directives concerning transport and the welfare of pigs and calves were in the process of being finalised and these were seen to have the very real potential to be used as non-tariff trade barriers against "third countries" where animal welfare standards were not at least equivalent to those adopted within the EC. Their future, however, is now in some doubt, due to the December 1992 EC summit decision on subsidiarity.

In relation to global trade, animal welfare considerations have also been raised in discussions on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade Sanitary/Phyto-Sanitary (GATT/SPS) agreement. The EC, in particular, has sought to include animal welfare within the scope of the agreement. This has been opposed by other trading blocs, on the basis that it is a subjective area and few objective measurements can be made that can be formulated into disciplines that are readily quantifiable and could be sustained internationally.

Although the international regulatory position is in a state of some confusion, and future outcomes are open to interpretation, it is important to look beyond the "barrier to market entry" notion. The challenge must surely be not merely to secure market access but to reinforce the quality image of New Zealand products and to ensure optimum product positioning in key markets. Agreed, scientifically robust animal welfare standards can make a major contribution to the latter objective.

### CONCLUSION

Over the last 10 years, we have seen established in New Zealand an animal welfare infrastructure which ensures that we are well placed to take a proactive rather than a reactive approach to animal welfare issues.

The National Animal Ethics Advisory Committee (NAEAC) and the network of Institutional Animal Ethics Committees ensure that appropriate standards are maintained in the areas of research and teaching. The Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (AWAC) plays a parallel role regarding the use of animals in agriculture and recreation. These two national ministerial advisory committees are complemented by specific interest groups such as the Live Sheep Export Animal Welfare Committee and the writing groups established to draft codes of practice. These latter groups are representative of the key interested parties and ensure wide consultation on all material drafted.

The establishment of the Animal Behaviour and Welfare Research Centre here at Ruakura and the more recent decision to create a Chair of Animal Welfare Science at Massey will ensure an enhanced effort, in the years ahead, in the areas of research and teaching.

There will, however, remain an ongoing challenge for both the scientific and farming communities to more effectively communicate with society at large. In the research area, the organisation ANZCCART (the Australian and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research and Teaching) provides a good model for the benefits of national coordination and trans-Tasman collaboration.

In conclusion, I would suggest that the opportunities which animal welfare presents to New Zealand animal scientists are of national economic significance and far outweigh the threats.

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