



Farm animals

The RSPCA is working to improve the welfare of as many farm animals as possible, at every stage of their lives. Hundreds of millions of animals are farmed in the UK each year, the majority of which are reared, transported and slaughtered/killed in ways that we believe do not meet their behavioural and physical needs, although legally permitted.

The farm animals team works to achieve positive changes in practices and attitude in all sectors of the food chain, including via encouraging application of the RSPCA welfare standards for farm animals.

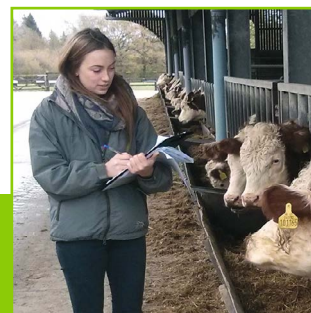
ASSUREWEL: WELFARE OUTCOME ASSESSMENT

AssureWel, a collaborative project led by the RSPCA, the Soil Association and the University of Bristol, moved into its fifth year. The primary aim of the project is to improve farm animal welfare via development of practical, scientifically informed welfare assessments, to be implemented within the RSPCA's Freedom Food and the Soil Association's farm assurance schemes.

Welfare assessments have been developed for laying hens, dairy cattle, finishing pigs and dry sows and are being fully implemented

within both schemes. The assessment results can be used to evaluate and monitor the welfare of the animals farmed under the schemes and to inform future standard development decisions.

In 2014 the project has been developing welfare assessments for beef cattle, sheep and meat chickens. Development incorporates a literature review, industry consultation and on-farm piloting to ensure the measures and protocols are both robust and practical.



Sophie Butcher –
Scientific Officer (Welfare Outcomes Assessment)

“Welfare outcome assessment provides us with a better understanding of the impact that the resources provided are having on the animals.”

staff in action

Encouraging adoption of welfare assessment

A key goal of the AssureWel project is to encourage other schemes in the UK and internationally to adopt the AssureWel approach and embed welfare assessments within their own schemes.

In April the farm animals team and **RSPCA International** colleagues hosted the first *AssureWel International* workshop, which was attended by several like-minded farm assurance schemes from within

the EU and beyond. The workshop facilitated sharing of best practice between the schemes on developing and implementing welfare outcome assessments on-farm to improve farm animal welfare.

Reaching an international audience

In September we attended the Assessment of Animal Welfare at Farm and Group Level (WAFL) international scientific conference and presented work carried out as part of the AssureWel project.

The conference was attended by around 350 delegates, including welfare scientists and other interested stakeholders, providing an excellent platform to discuss developments and exchange information regarding the assessment of farm animal welfare. Our presentation focused on how Freedom Food assessors and RSPCA farm livestock officers can use welfare assessments to engage positively with farmers and encourage them to make changes on farm to improve animal welfare.

Improvements for laying hens



‘benchmarking of core welfare measures’

Welfare assessments have been undertaken on Freedom Food and Soil Association approved laying hen farms for the last three years.

Using data collected during this time, we have seen feather loss reduce by approximately a third for laying hens within the schemes. Benchmarking of feather loss data has enabled farmers to see where they score for certain welfare measures compared to their peers, and is one communication tool used on-farm to encourage improvement. Future plans include introducing benchmarking of core welfare measures for other species within the AssureWel project.

www.assurewel.org

WORKING WITH THE FOOD INDUSTRY

An important aspect of the team's work is liaising with companies and individuals within the food industry, a crucial sector in the food chain which can be very influential in driving change in the treatment of farm animals. Major retailers

and other large food companies source from a wide range and large number of suppliers in the UK and overseas, so working constructively with them provides the RSPCA with the opportunity to reach a huge number of farm animals.

Many food industry companies are increasingly aware of the importance to their consumers of the welfare of the animals producing the goods they sell. They also appreciate the value of taking account of scientific and other evidence when developing

their policies and standards. These companies often seek the advice and involvement of the RSPCA in this area of their work, and the department's work with retailers and other food companies during 2014 focused on several areas including the following:

- on-farm research and development trials assessing the welfare of different breeds of meat chicken in collaboration with a major retailer and one of their chicken production company suppliers
- liaison with several major retailers exploring opportunities to work together on development of on-farm and slaughterhouse-based welfare outcome assessment measures and protocols
- information gathering from, and provision to, food companies during review of the RSPCA farm animal welfare standards' development and communication process
- exploring opportunities to help food companies' suppliers move towards membership of the RSPCA's **Freedom Food** scheme.

Welfare in aquaculture:

advising on farmed salmon

A member of the farm animals team was invited to visit Tasmania to provide technical animal welfare advice to an Australian salmon farming company. This consultancy trip included visits to the hatchery

right through to the harvesting of fully grown six kilogram fish and allowed us to observe how they deal with wildlife interactions on the farm, notably Australian and New Zealand fur seals.

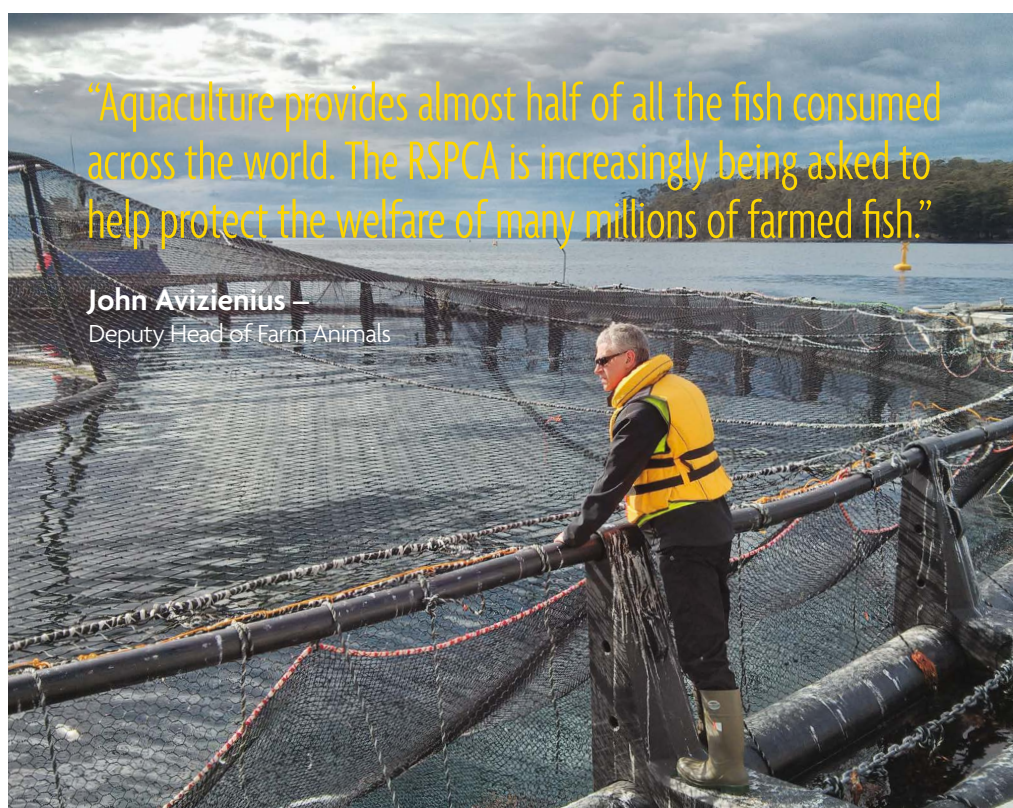
During the visit we also advised colleagues from **RSPCA Australia** on the development of their own farmed salmon standards, for use in their **Approved Farming Scheme**, which operates throughout Australia.

Evaluating new meat chicken slaughter systems

In June the farm animals team was invited to observe a new system developed in the US for killing meat chickens at slaughter plants. We took the opportunity to learn about the development, operation and humaneness of the **Low Atmospheric Pressure System**, which is not currently legally permitted for use within the UK.

The system works by gradually withdrawing air available to the birds over a fixed period of time. As the air is withdrawn, the amount of oxygen available to the birds decreases, so the birds eventually lose consciousness and die. The system replicates ascent to high altitude and could potentially offer a very humane alternative to current methods of killing chickens.

Whilst we are cautiously positive about the potential of this development, more research is required to demonstrate the impact of the system on chicken welfare.



"Aquaculture provides almost half of all the fish consumed across the world. The RSPCA is increasingly being asked to help protect the welfare of many millions of farmed fish."

John Avizienius –
Deputy Head of Farm Animals

BETTER TRAINING FOR SAFER AND KINDER FOOD

The RSPCA was invited to participate in the EU's **Better Training for Safer Food** initiative – a series of training events for staff involved with official controls of food related laws, including farm animal welfare. This included the *Animal Welfare in Poultry Production* training events where a member of the farm animals team presented to poultry vets from across the EU.

As well as sharing our concerns about the **welfare of laying hens** kept in cages, we encouraged vets to make use of 'welfare outcomes' during their official inspections to assess the hens' physical, behavioural and mental well-being.

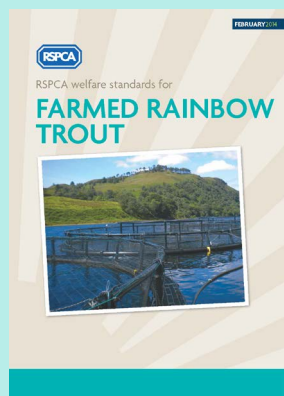
John Avizienius/RSPCA Farm Animals Department; Andrew Forsyth x2/RSPCA Photolibrary



Kate Parkes –
Senior Scientific Officer

“The standards cover every aspect of the pigs’ lives. They go above and beyond legislation in the UK in a number of key areas.”

staff in action



RSPCA welfare standards for farmed rainbow trout

We launched the first set of RSPCA welfare standards for a ‘new’ species of farm animal for twelve years in February. The RSPCA welfare standards for farmed Rainbow trout were developed after we were approached by Rainbow trout farmers and retailers to provide a set of welfare standards, building on the success of the existing welfare standards for farmed Atlantic salmon.

Following a two-year development period, the resulting standards cover the two distinct phases of trout farming – freshwater and marine farming – and take account of legislation, official codes of practice, scientific research, veterinary advice, recommendations of the **Farm Animal Welfare Committee (FAWC)** and the practical experience of the aquaculture industry.

RSPCA welfare standards for pigs

RSPCA welfare standards for farm animals are regularly reviewed in consultation with the farming industry, veterinary profession and welfare research sector, to ensure that they take proper account of the latest scientific research and practical innovation.

A new version of the RSPCA welfare standards for pigs was launched in November 2014. The revised standards include more information on the requirements for indoor free farrowing, biosecurity for transport vehicles and – for the first time – space allowances for cull sows during lairage. The standards and guidance on teeth clipping and tail docking – difficult issues for all within the pig industry – have also been strengthened.

Whilst it is accepted that, in a few exceptional cases, tail docking

may be necessary to reduce the pain and suffering caused by a serious tail biting problem on an individual unit, we are also working with pig producers in a number of ways to encourage a move away from this practice wherever possible.

The RSPCA standards require that permission must be sought from the RSPCA on a farm-by-farm basis before tail docking can be undertaken, and this permission will only be granted if farmers can show that they have implemented various additional actions known to help reduce the incidence of tail biting.

The new version of the standards sets additional rules relating to tail length and to uniformity of length – important considerations in reducing the welfare impact of tail docking and the likelihood of biting respectively.





20 YEARS OF FREEDOM FOOD

FREEDOM FOOD

July 2014 marked the 20th anniversary of the launch of the RSPCA's **Freedom Food** scheme.

Since then, there have been substantial changes in farming practices, food retailing and consumer behaviour, including a notable positive shift in approach and attitude towards the welfare of farm animals. Progress in scientific research has substantially increased knowledge of the physical and behavioural needs of different farmed species. Research and practical innovation have also enabled at least some of those learnings to be implemented in practice, including through the RSPCA's farm animal welfare standards.

The launch of Freedom Food, a concept initiated and developed by the RSPCA farm animals department, heralded a significant change of approach by the RSPCA. Along with other farm assurance schemes and similar initiatives, Freedom Food has forged an increasingly constructive and collective approach towards improving animal welfare in farming, linking welfare-concerned consumers, via food companies and processors, to farmers who rear their animals under

RSPCA standards. Such initiatives underpin the important concept that farm animal welfare is everybody's responsibility and that everyone can act to improve it. Freedom Food's new consumer branding in 2015, with its animal-focused logo and 'RSPCA Assured' certification mark on products, should help to strengthen still further consumers' understanding of the scheme's aims.

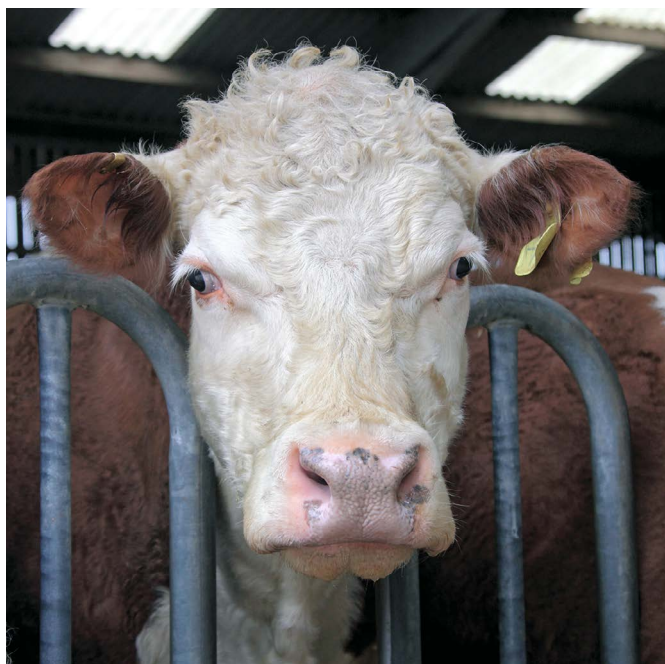
As our understanding of the welfare needs of farmed species grows over coming years, including through important new developments such as **welfare outcome assessment** (which is now being implemented in the Freedom Food scheme), it is likely that the challenges faced in acting upon that knowledge will become ever greater. Consequently, it is even more important that all relevant sectors in the food chain work constructively together to harness and implement collective knowledge and experience effectively. The RSPCA will continue to encourage and participate in collective working of this kind as, despite important progress over the past two decades, there is still a great deal to be done before all farm animals are provided with the potential to have a good life.



ENGAGING WITH AND INFLUENCING DECISION MAKERS

The farm animals team represent the RSPCA on a number of influential government, farming industry and scientific research project committees and working groups, enabling us to put forward our views and encourage improvements in farm animal welfare.

Some examples are outlined below:



Cattle Health and Welfare Group

The **Cattle Health and Welfare Group** is made up of a wide spectrum of cattle industry stakeholders; the RSPCA is the only welfare representative within the group. Amongst other things, the group coordinates a programme of focussed improvements in cattle health and welfare in Great Britain. Statutory bodies such as the Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs (Defra) seek advice from the group on initiatives that could potentially have an impact at

farm level, such as a national programme of Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD) eradication.

The group is responsible for a number of other initiatives including production of the annual Cattle Health and Welfare report and implementation of the initiatives and annual reporting of the Dairy Cow Welfare Strategy, a ten-year initiative aimed at improving the health and welfare of the dairy cow in a number of priority areas, such as lameness, fertility and nutrition.

Beak Trimming Action Group

Defra is committed to reviewing its policy on beak trimming of laying hens in 2015 with a view to implementing a ban on the practice in January 2016. The RSPCA is a member of the **Beak Trimming Action Group**, which has been tasked with advising Defra on this review.

The RSPCA is working to ensure that the welfare of laying hens is at the forefront of any decision made, encouraging all stakeholders to work towards a shared goal of improving hen welfare through better management practices and a commitment to the eventual phase out of the currently permitted infrared beak trimming.



Pig Health and Welfare Council

The **Pig Health and Welfare Council** (PHWC) is a cross-industry alliance, with RSPCA representation, which aims to drive forward the delivery and strategic aims of the pig industry with regards to health and welfare. The **PHWC welfare sub-group**, facilitated by the RSPCA, aims to achieve consensus on important pig welfare issues, how to progress these, and the ultimate aims in each case. This year the sub-group sought to identify and implement some initial practical steps to deliver on the primary focus issues for farmed pigs that were agreed in 2013, including welfare at farrowing (prolificacy, management of outdoor sows, confinement at farrowing etc), tail damage, aggression and sick pig management (including euthanasia). Further details will be provided in the 2013-2014 report of the work of the Council which will be published in 2015.

