



Welfare Quality Project - Conference Summary

The European Union (EU) launched a Welfare Quality (WQ) Project in May 2004. The five-year project “is to provide practical science based tools and strategies to improve the welfare of farm animals.” 39 institutes and universities from 13 countries are involved, with a total budget of 17 million Euros (approximately, \$23,376,551 CAD).

The objectives of the project are:

- 1) To develop practical strategies/measures to improve animal welfare
- 2) To develop a European on-farm welfare assessment standard
- 3) To develop a European animal welfare information standard
- 4) To integrate and interrelate the most appropriate specialist expertise in the multidisciplinary field of animal welfare in Europe

The WQ project aims to facilitate the development of strategies for ensuring that higher standards of welfare do not result in ‘lower standard products from third countries.’

Initial research results were reported during a November 2005 conference in Brussels. Conference proceedings and more information on the WQ project are available at www.welfarequality.net. The following are points of interest:

- Consumer surveys/focus groups indicate that while consumers believe that farm animal welfare is an important issue:
 - They admit to a lack of knowledge on the subject
 - “A significant portion of consumers deliberately avoid expanding their knowledge on farming practices and animal welfare in a desire to distance themselves from ethically challenging issues”

Writer’s Note: These findings are likely applicable to Canadian consumers too.

- WQ will focus on animal based measures (e.g., health and behaviour) for welfare assessments, with resource (e.g., access to food) or management (e.g., cage size, flooring) based measures used in a more secondary fashion to identify the causes of, and solutions to, a welfare problem. E.g., Lameness (animal-based measure) may indicate a need for improved hoof care or flooring (management measures).
- Despite compliance with rigorous *resource-based standards*, welfare problems like lameness are still high on RSPCA Freedom Food assured dairy farms.
- WQ project is looking at genetic solutions to welfare problems
- Multiple mentions of links between animal welfare and food quality/food safety
- Dr. David Fraser (University of BC Professor) sits on WQ project’s Scientific Board
- **One of the end goals of the WQ project is to develop a ‘welfare friendly label.’**
- President European Dairy Farmers – “The problem is that the consumers demand for cheap food has created a pressure to rationalize and develop more efficient and competitive production systems. This pressure, exerted by consumers, retailers and politicians, has, at times, become so intense that it has led to production systems that have gone beyond a sense of animal welfare.” He points to retailers and buyers as the key persons to take “economic responsibility to fulfill the demands of good animal welfare in the products they buy and present to the consumer.”