

Flemish government

Animal Welfare Department

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Animal welfare in intensive farming

The text below is intended as a first step towards a more thorough and in-depth vision concerning the future of animal husbandry, viewed more specifically from the perspective of animal welfare.

What is livestock intensification?

The production of animal products increased sharply after World War II. Especially in industrialised countries and regions such as Flanders, this increase in production was accompanied by major changes in the structure and methods of livestock farming. The number of farms decreased but the farms themselves became larger and housed more animals per farm.

In livestock farming, intensification involved many animals being kept in a limited indoor area with less manpower per animal. In addition, based on scientific findings in various disciplines, considerable attention was paid to barn design and climate control. The quest for cheap, high-quality protein for the population led to the breeding of single-purpose breeds, a continual increase in feed efficiency, faster growth and increased milk, egg and meat production.

However, these better production results were accompanied by adverse side effects for livestock,ⁱ such as unprofitable males and increasing susceptibility to certain diseases and disorders, among others.

Intensification turned livestock into a means of efficiently producing protein. This led to the instrumentalisation of animals, blurring their recognition as individual sentient beings with their own needs.

Animal welfare in intensive livestock farming

During the past few decades, the view of animal welfare has changed (see Addendum). According to the most recent viewpoints, livestock farmers should set out to ensure positive welfare and a humane life for their

livestock. Not only should animals be spared from undergoing unpleasant subjective experiences such as frustration, pain and suffering, but attention should above all be paid to positive emotions and experiences that lead to a better quality of life. According to the Eurobarometerⁱⁱ, concern for the treatment of animals in intensive farming is on the rise.

In response to legislation, market demands and its own initiative, among other things, the agricultural sector has made efforts to improve animal welfare on livestock farms (for example, by introducing coat brushes, increased use of environmental enrichment, a ban on conventional battery cages in the case of laying hens, group housing for calves and pregnant sows and state-of-the-art cubicle and free-range stalls). Government enforcement is also enhanced by audits that verify legal and non-statutory animal welfare requirements. Yet major animal welfare problems continue to exist in the livestock industry of today:

Some examples from Flanders include:

- The tails of almost 100% of pigs are still routinely docked, even though this is prohibited by European regulations.
- 15% of live-born piglets do not reach weaning ageⁱⁱⁱ.
- About 30% of Flemish dairy cattle have a moderate or severe limp^{iv}.
- 26% of dairy cows on dairy farms in Flanders experience a case of clinical mastitis at least once a year, of which 7% of cases are severe (the animal is sick), 30% are moderate (e.g. flakes in the milk) and 63% are mild (udder abnormality)^v.
- In the case of broiler chickens on Flemish farms, 47% are clearly lame, 22% are suffering from severe heel dermatitis and 78% from severe foot pad lesions^{vi}.
- Among broiler chickens transported to Belgian slaughterhouses, 0.3% do not survive the pre-slaughter phase (capture/loading/transportation) and 1.9% of animals suffer a wing fracture^{vii}.
- In the case of laying hens housed in Flemish farms with aviary systems (without free range), 27.6% have foot pad dermatitis and 82.5% have a keel bone fracture.^{viii}
- In turkeys, 99% of female and 90% of male animals have footpad dermatitis, 20% of female and 73% of male animals have at least one breast blister^{ix}.

The ILVO-Livestock memorandum entitled 'De belangrijkste uitdagingen betreffende dierenwelzijn in de Vlaamse veehouderij' ('The main challenges concerning animal welfare in the Flemish livestock sector') provides a detailed description of the main welfare problems that exist in chickens, pigs and cattle (problem, causes/risk factors, degree of occurrence, sector and research initiatives)^x.

The future of agriculture

By introducing the Green Deal, the European Commission's ambition is for Europe to become the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The agricultural sector is also being required to make efforts to ensure sustainable production.

Current conventional animal husbandry has been developed from an economic perspective and consideration was then given as to how the animal can fit into this. Opinions about what the agriculture of the future should

look like are very diverse (sustainable intensification, nature-inclusive agriculture, circular agriculture, precision agriculture, etc.). These viewpoints take environmental, economic and social aspects into account. In balancing the various interests, contradictions may emerge and may require a whole-system approach to be adopted. In this regard, the Flemish Animal Welfare Council calls for more attention to be paid to the interests of the animal.

Animal-focused measures

The Flemish Animal Welfare Council believes that despite the efforts being made and the increasing amount of attention being paid to animal welfare, animal welfare in European intensive livestock farming is far from good and that it must and can improve.

The Council is convinced that in order for humane animal husbandry, increased attention must now be paid to individual welfare, including an animal's physiological and ethological needs. This includes ensuring that animals are healthy, that individual animals in pain are treated and that preventative measures against this are provided. Animals must also be able to fulfil their biological, behavioural and affective needs, have the ability to make species-specific choices and be able to exercise a sufficient degree of individual control over their environment. The goal is that the balance of positive and negative experiences should be beneficial and the animals have a sufficiently good state of mental well-being throughout their lives^{xi}.

The Council points out that elaborating measures to reduce the pressure of livestock farming on nature and climate must be used as an opportunity to also put animal welfare first and to reform livestock farming in a fundamentally animal-oriented way. This will not only require significant investments and cost-recovery models, but also well-trained livestock farmers.

The Council is aware that this issue is a shared responsibility in which not only the livestock farming chain (livestock farmers, feed companies, breeding establishments, etc.), but also the government, slaughterhouses, retailers and consumers themselves must fulfil their responsibility.

The Flemish Animal Welfare Council is calling for the introduction of a policy, the sole purpose of which is to focus on "One Welfare", a concept in which animal welfare depends on and is associated with human welfare and a sustainable environment.

Addendum: What is animal welfare and what form does livestock farming that allows animals to lead a humane life actually take?

Welfare science has evolved greatly since the "Five Freedoms" were formulated as a definition and standard in animal husbandry sixty years ago.

Meeting an animal's basic needs (nutrition, housing and health and the absence of a negative state (pain, stress, fear, illness)) is no longer enough. It is an ethical requirement that animals should be able to live a good life and have a minimum of positive experiences that provide sufficient quality of life or "a life worth living".

The starting point is to recognise the intrinsic value and integrity of the animal. That means: respecting the animal's own dignity as a sentient being that can experience pain and pleasure. Amongst other things, this means that livestock holders should no longer carry out physical interventions, such as tail docking or beak treatment, except in cases where ceasing to do so would be detrimental to the animal.

In addition, livestock husbandry with dignity should meet three basic needs: good nutrition, good environment and good health. In addition, an animal should have sufficient opportunities to exhibit essential natural behaviours and fulfil its needs. Finally, the animal must be able to reach an emotional state that it perceives as predominantly positive. To do this, it must be able to respond to conditions in its environment, have the ability to make choices and exercise some control over the environment^{xii}.

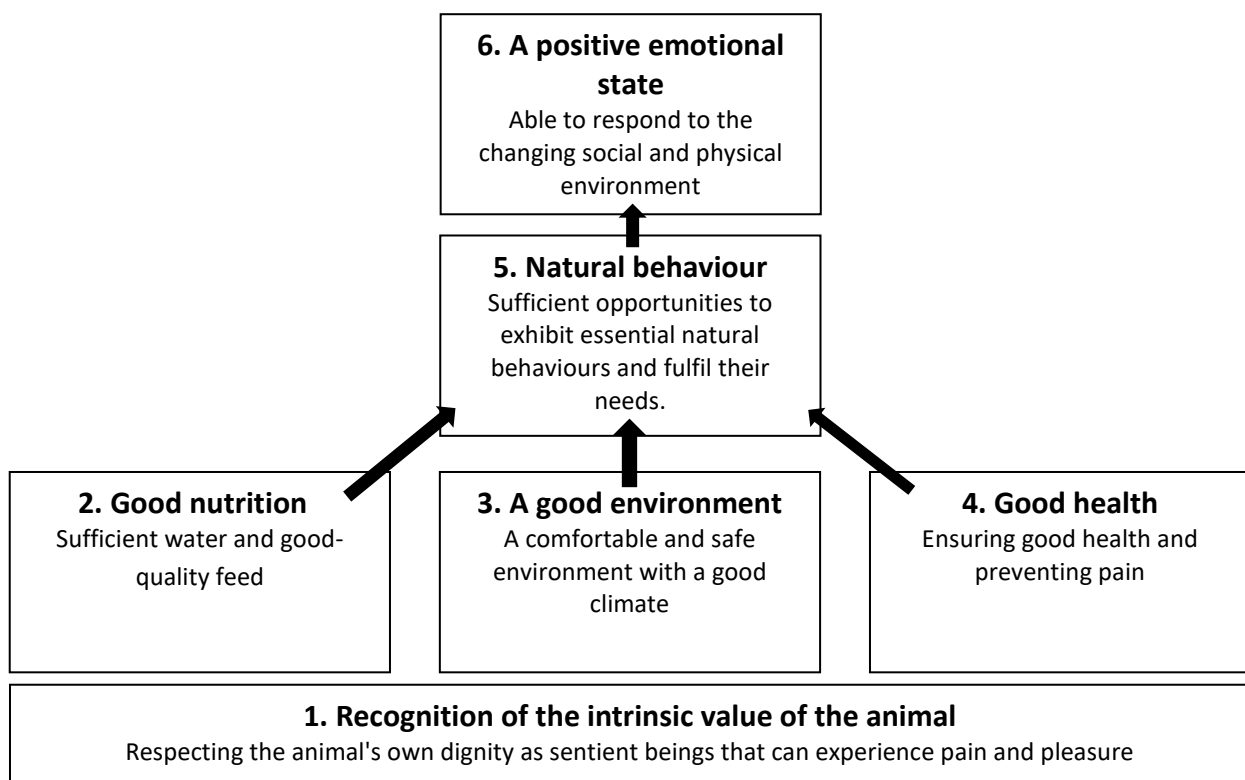


Figure: The six principles for humane animal husbandry

Source: Council on Animal Affairs (2021). Zienswijze Dierwaardige veehouderij. Report, 48 pages.
<https://www.rda.nl/publicaties/zienswijzen/2021/11/18/zienswijze-dierwaardige-veehouderij>

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- ⁱⁱ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2096>; https://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-09/EB97.2-food-safety-in-the-EU_report.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ Department of Agriculture and Fisheries – Agricultural figures: www.vlaanderen.be/landbouwcijfers
- ^{iv} Nivelles B., Bulens A., Stevens E., Van Aert M., Van Beirendonck S., Van Thielen J. & Driessen B. (2017). Gezonde klauwen op stal, 82p.; de Graaf S., Ampe B. & Tuytens F. (2017). Assessing dairy cow welfare at the beginning and end of the indoor period using the Welfare Quality® protocol. *Animal Welfare*. 26: 213-221.
- ^v Verbeke J., Piepers S., & De Vlieghe S. (2014). Pathogen-specific incidence rate of clinical mastitis in Flemish dairy herds, severity, and association with herd hygiene. *Journal of Dairy Science* 97: 6926-6934.
- ^{vi} Buijs S., Tuytens F. & Ampe B. (2016). Final report 'Studie naar de mogelijkheden voor implementatie van welzijnscontroles via diergerelateerde parameters' (Project: RT13/01 ANASPAR). ILVO.
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- ^{viii} Heerkens J.L.T., Delezie E., Rodenburg T.B., Kempen I., Zoons J., Ampe B. & Tuytens F.A.M. (2016). Risk factors associated with keel bone and foot pad disorders in laying hens housed in aviary systems. *Poultry Science* 95: 482-488.
- ^{ix} Unpublished data (2021); measurements in a turkey slaughterhouse.
- ^x Flanders Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (2021). The main challenges concerning animal welfare in the Flemish livestock industry. Memorandum for, and at the request of, the Flemish Minister of Economy, Innovation, Work, Social Economy and Agriculture Ms Hilde Crevits, 34 pages.
- ^{xi} Fraser D., Weary D.M., Pajor E.A. and Milligan B.N. (1997). A scientific conception of animal welfare that reflects ethical concerns. *Animal Welfare* 6: 187-205.
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