

## Report on Farm Animal Welfare Council Annual Open Meeting held on 9 July 2008 at Mary Sumner House, London.

**Background:** FAWC is an independent advisory body established in 1979. Its terms of reference are to keep under review the welfare of farm animals on agricultural land, at market, in transit and at the place of slaughter; and to advise Government of any legislative or other changes that may be necessary. In considering the welfare conditions under which farm animals are kept, the Council is guided by ideal which have become known as the Five Freedoms:

**Freedom from hunger and thirst-** by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.

**Freedom from discomfort** – by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.

**Freedom from pain, injury or disease** – by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.

**Freedom to express normal behaviour** – by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind

**Freedom from fear and distress** – by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

**Meeting:** We were welcomed by Chairman, Professor Christopher Wathes who explained that the meeting was intended to provide an update on work undertaken during the past year and to lean about current issues. FAWC is an advisory body funded by DEFRA and does not campaign. In July 2007 they had released a report on Stockmanship which had recognised the demanding responsibilities needed in the care of farm animals and had recommended that the farming industry and Government should evaluate the benefits of education and training in terms of staff satisfaction and retention, the value of farming business and the standards of animal welfare on British farms. In November 2007 FAWC had produced an Opinion on beak trimming of laying hens. The benefits of beak trimming in reducing the risk of injuries caused by pecking needed to be weighed against the trauma caused to the bird during the trimming and the loss of sensitivity afterwards, the beak being the main sensory tool for the bird in exploring her environment. A ban on beak trimming is due to be implemented in England, Scotland and Wales from the end of 2010 but FAWC feels that the industry will not be ready for the implementation.

Huw Davies introduced **the Report on the Implications of Castration and Tail Docking for the Welfare of Lambs** which was published In June 2008. This covered some very complex issues. There is no doubt that the rubber rings used for the process on lambs aged 4 to 6 weeks old does cause considerable pain. The problems arise at the age of 6 months when uncastrated ram lambs start to develop heavier forequarters, darker flesh and courser meat which has resulted in meat processors rejecting such lambs because the consumer will not like the taste. However we in the UK do eat lamb from New Zealand where only about 40% of lambs are castrated – can we tell the difference? Some other problems showed up during the epidemic of 'Blue Tongue' last year when flocks could not be moved and there were delays in getting the lambs to market which caused numerous unplanned pregnancies and head butting between young males.

Tail docking is a traditional and routine procedure on many British farms and is done to prevent faecal soiling which attracts flystrike, a particularly nasty disease in which the maggots literally eat the animal alive, causing much distress and which seems to be on the increase. FAWC feels that more research needs to be done to reduce the fly population or breeding animals resistant to ectoparasites as an alternative to the painful docking procedure. Unfortunately at the moment there is no local anaesthetic licensed for use by farmers.

The report was well accepted from those attending.

David Henderson gave an update on the **Slaughter Working Group** who had been focusing on the slaughter of white meat (which includes rabbits but not dealt with here as there is only one processing plant at the moment). Outbreaks of Avian Flu during the study affected the progress of the work but also provided the opportunity to access the emergency gassing procedures. FAWC feels that there is much concern about the lack of consideration given to the birds both when catching and handling, especially to laying hens, and at the point of death, being strung up by their feet ( a sensitive part of the body, used for scratching and feeling) onto lines travelling at a speed of 10,000 per hour. They would also like to see better electric stunning methods, as at the moment the current is not always strong enough to kill immediately as their heads are dipped into the water troughs and they drown. In some countries in the EU two gasses are used one to stun and one to kill which means less stress is caused. It was confirmed that 90% of turkeys are already subject to this controlled atmosphere stunning in the UK.

In **the General discussion** FAWC was questioned on its opinion of Enriched Cages for Laying Hens as they consider them a compromise solution. Some in the room could not equate this with the FAWC ideal of freedom to express normal behaviour.

One Trading Standard Officer pointed out that farmers are allowed to kill their own animals without training, which can cause much suffering if badly done.

I found this a most interesting, if harrowing, meeting and we had plenty of time to ask questions if needed.

Stella Nicholas