

Food Choice & Consumer Concerns about Animal Welfare in Ireland

Irish Examiner.com

Consumers conscious of animal welfare issues

by Ray Ryan

A TEAGASC study of consumer attitudes reveals that while most consumers are not concerned about animal welfare, consumers are more concerned about welfare issues when purchasing beef.

49 cattle with BSE

By Eoin Aherne, Eoina Collins

At least 49 BSE-infected animals and perhaps as many as 100 more died in the past 12 months in Ireland, according to a report from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

of animal welfare
Consumers realise ideal systems may not be viable

IRISH consumers believe that food animals which are raised in normally as possible will be safer to eat. They also believe that some to better understand would impact on their purchasing behaviour.

There are among key findings of a study undertaken by a Food Marketing Research group at the National Food Centre, based on four consumer focus groups and six in-depth interviews.

The traditional extensive system of beef production in Ireland was regarded by consumers as the ideal. Overall, participants said low-range systems should be the objective.

...may none of the facts that of the BSE crisis and...

Irish beef still safe - Walsh

By Christine Newman

THE IRISH TIMES

INTERVIEW

Friday, June 1, 2001

Animals versus humans suffer from same disease

the Food

Agriculture and food production is a sensitive sector before. As EU living standards rise, the price of food is no longer the determining factor where many consumers are concerned. They want to know how it is produced in terms of animal welfare, and they are increasingly willing to pay for a guarantee of food safety. Outbreaks of BSE and Foot and Mouth diseases in recent years have concentrated consumer concerns in that regard, along with a rash of scandals troubling the quality of food production.

Irish beef still safe - Walsh

By Christine Newman

IRISH beef is the safest in the world, but the latest BSE scare has affected trade, the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Mr Walsh, told an Oireachtas committee yesterday.

The Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine had included a special item on the agenda to discuss the crisis.

Mr Walsh said a BSE-infected carcass was found in a French



FOOD CHOICE AND CONSUMER CONCERNS ABOUT ANIMAL WELFARE IN IRELAND

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SUMMARY

Consumer concerns about farm animal welfare and the impact of these concerns on food choice in Ireland were investigated. The aim was to identify and analyse the nature and level of consumer concern. The qualitative and quantitative studies demonstrated that although consumers are concerned about farm animal welfare, this concern is not a priority in food choice. Consumers use animal welfare as an indicator of other product attributes such as food safety, quality and healthiness, which they usually perceive as more important. Consequently, consumers equate good animal welfare standards with good food standards.

Consumers define animal welfare in terms of animals being allowed to lead natural lives. Natural to the consumer equates with production methods that ensure that the animals should be reared, fed, housed, and allowed to behave as close to natural conditions as possible. Irish consumers do not trust the Government or the food industry as sources of information, whom they see as willing to abdicate their responsibility for ensuring higher welfare standards to animal welfare and environmental organizations. When consumers do choose welfare products, invariably they buy free-range poultry or eggs. Consumers considered the lack of information and availability of welfare friendly products to be the main barriers to purchasing 'animal-friendly' products.

Consumers would like to see their concerns addressed through a combined strategy. This includes establishing acceptable minimum standards and changing agricultural policy to provide farmers with incentives to convert to higher welfare systems. This improvement on the supply side should be complemented by developments in the demand side including compulsory labelling, which provides consumers with information on animal welfare standards in various systems of production, and a public information campaign to inform and assist consumers in their purchase decisions.



INTRODUCTION

There is evidence of growing concerns about animal welfare amongst consumers in the European Union. Such evidence comes from the increasing demand for food products which are perceived by consumers to be more ‘animal-friendly’, for example free-range eggs (Mintel, 1996; MAPS, 1996; Sorensen, 1995) and the growth in the number of vegetarians (Mintel, 1994; Mintel, 1996). There have also been a number of consumer surveys which claim that consumers are becoming more concerned about animal welfare in food production (see for example MLC, 1996; Diestre, 1993; von Albensleben, 1988; 1989; 1994; Fiddes, 1991; Webster, 1995a; 1995b). Such concerns have implications for the future consumption of animal based food products.

A limited amount of information is available with regard to Irish consumer attitudes to animal welfare and ultimately its impact on their purchasing decisions. Consumer concern regarding animal welfare can vary from 14 to 80 % depending on the survey and the nature of the question asked. For example, such studies typically pose the question “Are you concerned about the welfare of animals produced for human consumption?” without any attempt to understand what consumers actually mean by animal welfare. So while there is little doubt that animal welfare is an important issue for a number of Irish consumers, it is difficult to know how many are concerned. Clearly while many people may say they are concerned about animal welfare, it is difficult to measure the strength of this concern. Existing research also provides little information on the specific nature of consumer concerns about animal welfare, in particular how such concerns relate to the actual practices used to rear animals and the potential influence of concerns about animal welfare on the choice of animal-based food products.

OBJECTIVES

The objective was to assess the nature and magnitude of consumer concerns about animal welfare within Ireland, assess the impact of these concerns on choice of animal-based food products and suggest strategies by which consumer concerns can be addressed.



METHODS

There were five stages, the first of which was a review of the literature on the demand for animal products and consumer concerns about animal welfare. The main purpose of this stage was to develop a detailed understanding of the current situation and to aid the design of the focus group discussion guide (stage 2).

Stage two utilised focus groups to explore the nature of consumer concerns about animal welfare. This enabled the consumers' understanding of animal welfare to be framed in the language of the consumer. In addition to discussing their food concerns consumers were also shown a video of different production systems used to produce five products, namely eggs, chicken, pork, beef and veal. The systems depicted in the video ranged from intensive to extensive systems of production. In total, four focus groups were undertaken in two locations in Ireland. Participants were randomly selected and asked to complete a short administered survey on their consumption of animal based food products. Those consumers who consumed meat, eggs and poultry were recruited for the focus groups.

The third stage of the project used in-depth interviews. Sixty interviews were conducted with both urban and rural consumers. A technique called 'laddering' was used to elicit consumer concerns about production methods employed in the production of eight animal based food products. The results were analysed using 'means-end chain analysis'. This illustrated the link between a consumer's concern and how that related to the consumer's value system. Respondents were again recruited through the use of a short survey on concerns about animal welfare and consumption of animal-based food products.

A representative sample of 500 Irish consumers was interviewed in stage 4. The aim of the survey was to assess consumer concerns about animal welfare and to identify segments of consumers with similar concerns about animal welfare. The interviews were conducted using a computer-assisted personal interviewing system. The questionnaire was designed based on the results of both the focus groups and the in-depth interviews.



The aim of the fifth stage of the project was to develop potential strategies that address consumer concerns about the welfare of animals produced for human consumption. A workshop was held for representatives of a number of organisations including producers, food industry, animal welfare groups and policymakers. Participants were encouraged to suggest a range of potential strategies that could address consumer concerns. Each strategy was appraised in terms of its effectiveness and practicality. The five different strategies developed were then assessed by four consumer focus groups. Consumers were asked to comment on each strategy in terms of its effectiveness in addressing concerns. Furthermore they were also asked to identify an ideal strategy and to rank each of the five strategies.

FINDINGS

Focus group research

Nature of concerns:

Generally consumers tended to be more concerned about food issues other than animal welfare. Intensive systems when mentioned related to the link between the type of system used and its relationship to food-linked diseases and food contaminants, such as hormones and antibiotics. When prompted, participants in all the groups showed more concern. In particular, they identified concerns about egg, poultry and veal production and in general a concern about animals having little space. Other concerns mentioned included the lack of standards and health and safety issues. The issues of trust and traceability in the supply chain were also of concern.

Meanings of animal welfare:

Consumers had various ideas about the meaning of animal welfare. While some consumers defined animal welfare in terms of production, including more natural types of production, the issue of cruelty and intensive systems, other definitions centered on transport and slaughter issues.



Trust:

This is a major issue as many consumers have difficulty in deciding whom to trust in relation to food concerns. The government, butchers and independent agencies were seen as more trustworthy sources of information than television, health boards or farmers. This lack of trust means that consumers are less inclined to believe labelling claims regarding animal welfare.

Responsibility for animal welfare:

Most consumers were of the opinion that responsibility for animal welfare lay with environmental and animal welfare organisations, veterinarians and the farmers themselves rather than with consumers. Although consumer responsibility was less, consumers could effect change by demanding welfare friendly products and lobbying their local politicians.

Reactions to video of production systems

Eggs: Of the three systems, battery, barn and free range, the barn system was nearest to the ideal as it allowed some freedom and space but was economically viable. Some limited outdoor access would enhance the system.

Chicken: Of the two systems, barn and outdoor rearing, the barn system with fewer hens in each barn, thus increasing the space per chicken and a facility to go outdoors, was seen as the most realistic. With regard to egg and poultry production, the need for legislation so that the animals did not have to endure any cruelty was stressed. There was recognition of a possible need for subsidies for farmers to enable animal welfare-friendly production systems to be implemented.

Pork: For sows, stalls and tethers were seen as cruel and unnecessary. While farrowing crates may be beneficial, the amount of time spent in them should be restricted. The most realistic system for sows and fattening pigs is loose housing with straw.

Beef: The traditional system as used in Ireland, with animals outdoors for most of the year and brought in for the winter was preferred. It was seen as natural and healthy.

Veal: Veal crates and grouped housing were discussed. Most felt veal production, particularly with crates, should be banned and feeding calves a



diet of milk only to produce softer whiter meat was not acceptable. As a ban was unlikely the preference was for grouped housing.

All systems:

Veal crates were perceived as the cruellest of all the systems shown and everyone felt they should be banned. Their concern was heightened by the video and for egg, poultry and pig production, consumers, while favouring outdoor systems, recognised the need and advantages of housing. If consumers were better informed this would help move production towards systems more friendly to animal welfare.

In-depth interview results

Irish consumers have a number of animal welfare concerns. The issue of space restriction using battery cages and veal crates was the most frequently mentioned concern. Consumers felt that animals should be housed, fed and transported in conditions that were natural for the animals. Consequently, the result of “unnatural” animal behaviour was that the aesthetic, nutritional quality and safety of the food produced was affected. This could negatively affect human health.

Consumers were also very concerned about cruelty and related this to how they would feel if their pets were mistreated and to a deep-rooted desire to do things that were ethically right. Current production practices were for the large part seen as unethical in their treatment of animals.

The two values in the context of animal welfare that are of most importance to Irish consumers are ethics and their desire to live a long, healthy life. Ethics is predominantly linked to cruelty to animals and the distress that consumers feel when they believe animals are being mistreated. The desire to live a long healthy life primarily relates to consumers’ health concerns arising from production practises. They discuss health in terms of being able to reach their full potential, having a good quality of life and their responsibility to their family. Factors that affect human health are seen as the addition of antibiotics, hormones and synthetic chemicals in animal feed. The quality of food in terms of taste, texture and flavour are of great concern as in the consumer’s mind



these may result in a lack of food safety. Ultimately, these can lead to human diseases such as salmonella, *E coli*, CJD and allergies.

Survey results

Five hundred consumers were interviewed about their attitudes to the consumption of food products of animal origin. The results for frequency of consumption are shown in figure 1.

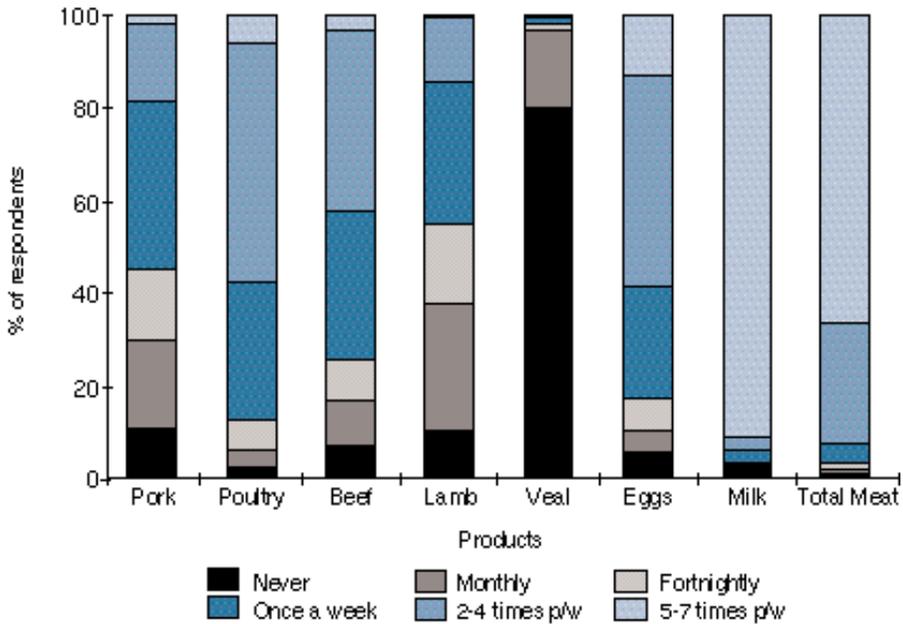


Figure 1: Frequency of consumption of food products of animal origin by Irish consumers



Meat consumption is prevalent among Irish consumers with only 1.2% of the sample reporting that they never eat any of the popular meats and poultry products. Poultry would appear to be the preferred meat of Irish consumers with only a minority of consumers (2.6%) never eating poultry and nearly nine out of every ten consumers eating poultry at least once a week. Beef is still popular despite negative associations, with almost three out of four respondents eating beef at least once a week. Frequency of consumption of veal is low with 80.2% of consumers reporting that they have never eaten veal. This lack of popularity is not surprising, as veal is a product that is not normally consumed for cultural reasons and is not readily available for purchase. Irish consumers are traditionally high consumers of dairy products, it is therefore not surprising that milk is the most frequently consumed product, consumed between 5 to 7 times per week by nine out of ten consumers surveyed.

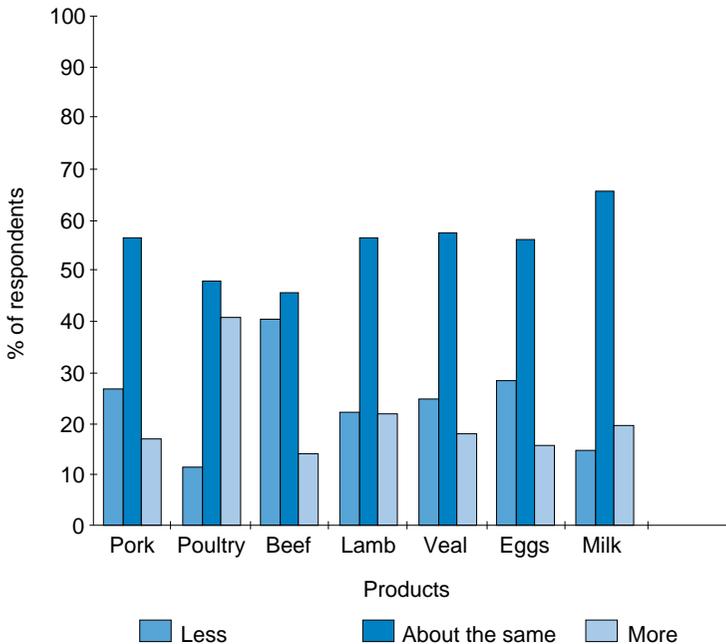


Figure 2: Change in consumption of food products of animal origin over the last five years among Irish consumers



There has not been a major decrease in the frequency of consumption of meat and poultry over the last five years (Figure 2). Forty-six per cent of consumers stated that they were eating the same amount of beef as they had done five years ago, however, four in ten were eating less. This contrasts with the consumption of poultry with four in ten consumers saying they were eating more poultry now than five years ago. On further examination of those who decreased their consumption of all products excluding veal, the proportions who had decreased consumption of red meats were as follows; beef 28.2%, pork 18% and lamb 14.7%. The proportion eating fewer eggs was 27%; for milk and poultry, the proportions were 12% and 11% respectively. A greater proportion of females are consuming less of all products compared to males.

The main single reason for changing consumption given by respondents was BSE. However, it would be inaccurate to take this reason in isolation because it included animal diseases and lack of trust in food safety, overall accounting for 23 %. Other reasons for changing consumption were health and diet accounting for 27%, and animal welfare and ethical reasons (3%)

Table 1: Irish consumers’ view on the importance of attributes of production systems for the welfare of animals

	Space	Outdoor Access	Feed	Transport	Slaughter	Normal Behaviour
Very unimportant	0.6	1.2	0.6	0.8	1.2	0.8
Somewhat unimportant	2.0	1.0	0.4	1.8	2.0	2.2
Neither important nor unimportant	1.6	1.6	1.4	2.2	2.8	1.0
Somewhat important	12.2	12.0	5.2	16.1	12.0	15.4
Very important	83.6	84.1	92.4	79.0	81.9	80.6

Table 1 illustrates that the majority of consumers when prompted considered the attributes of space, animal feed, access to outdoors, transport, slaughtering and the ability to behave normally as very important prerequisites for the



welfare of animals used in the production of food. Of these attributes, nine out of ten respondents considered the quality of the animals' feed to be very important. The animals' access to the outside and the amounts of space animals have to live in, was very important, at 84% in both cases, respectively. The ability to express normal behaviour, and the conditions in which live animals were transported and slaughtered under were considered to be very important by about eight out of every ten respondents.

Forty-five per cent of respondents stated that they had reduced their consumption of food products in the last five years specifically because of concerns about the ways in which farm animals are treated. Nearly half of all females had reduced their consumption compared to four out of ten males.

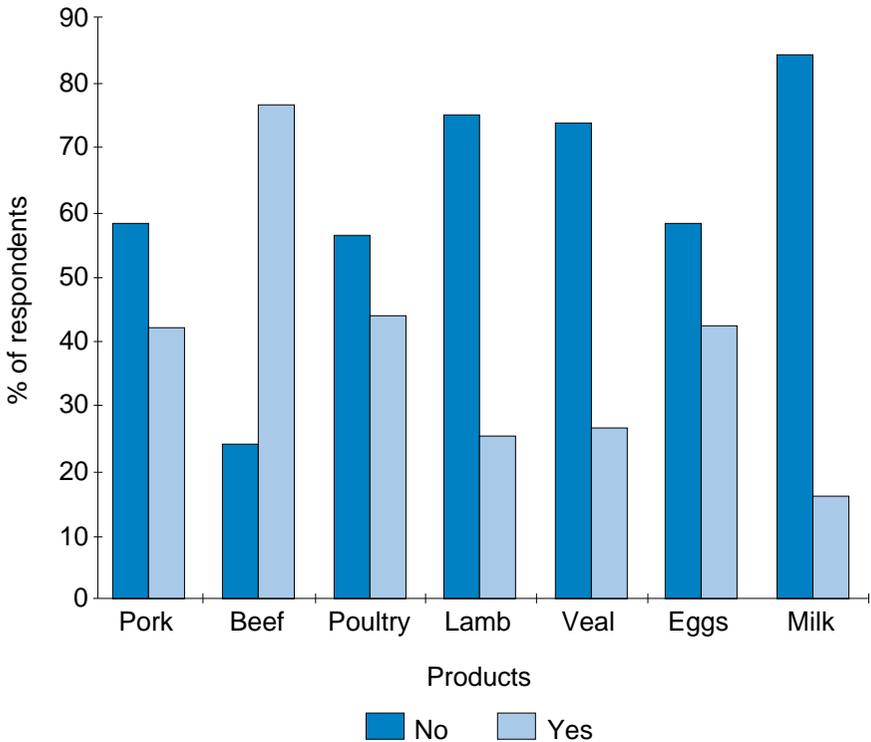


Figure 5: Reduced consumption of foods of animal origin by Irish consumers due to concern about the way animals are treated



Three-quarters of all respondents stated that they had reduced their consumption of beef as a result of concerns about the way animals are treated in the production of food. Only 42.1% of consumers had reduced their consumption of eggs; this is lower than might be expected and may be as a result of higher consumption of free-range products in this category than in the other food categories. Four out of every ten reduced their consumption of poultry and pork, while only one quarter of respondents reduced their consumption of lamb and veal.

Over three-quarters of all consumers surveyed said that they tended to select food products on which the label indicated that the products were produced to higher than normal standards of animal welfare. The main products selected were poultry, eggs and beef. However, while one in five consumers selected poultry produced to higher welfare standards, only 3% always consumed it and 22% mostly consumed it. The biggest category of consumers rarely consumed welfare friendly poultry (38%) and a third occasionally consumed it. Therefore, the results indicate that while a majority consume welfare friendly products, they do so rarely or occasionally.

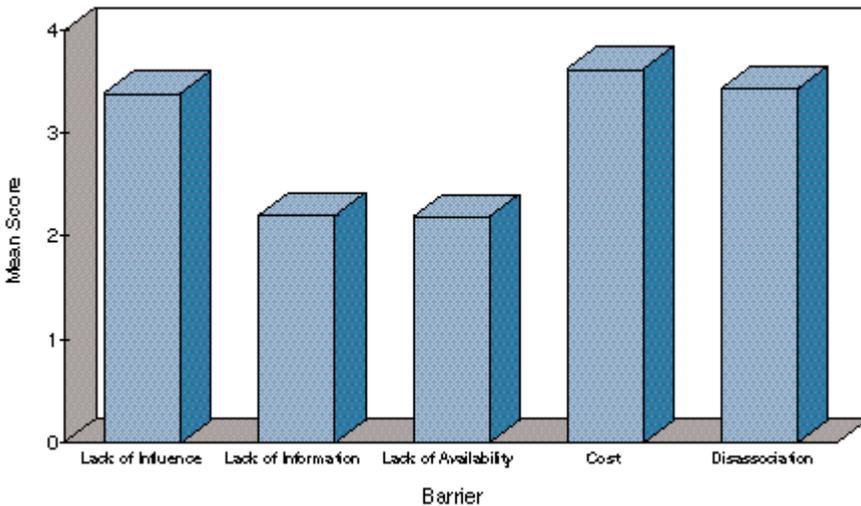


Figure 6: Irish consumers' perceptions of the barriers to the consumption of welfare friendly food products of animal origin



Consumers were asked to rate a number of statements that covered five main factors that may act as barriers to the consumption of products produced using higher welfare standards. The statements were ranked on a scale of one to five where one indicated strong agreement that the factor acted as a barrier and five indicated strong disagreement and the factor was therefore not considered to act as a barrier. The main barriers to consuming these products are the lack of information and the lack of availability. Lack of personal influence on animal welfare standards and disassociating the product from the animal were rated as having less of an impact on consumption. Consumers appear to be aware of the impact of different or higher welfare standards for animals and consider that buying these products does in fact have an influence on the methods of production used. Cost does not appear to act as an important barrier in the consumption of welfare friendly products.

Consumers trust the information they receive about animal welfare from their friends more than from any other source. However, agencies involved in consumer awareness, animal welfare and the environment are also perceived to be trustworthy sources of information. The local butcher was seen as a trustworthy source of information. This supports previous research which found that a large number of consumers buy from their butchers as they feel they are trustworthy and have information readily available on the products they are selling. The least trustworthy sources of information on farm animal welfare were perceived to be the government, the food industry, farmers and supermarkets.

Strategies - focus groups results

Focus group participants discussed the following strategies as a means of addressing consumer concerns about the welfare of farm animals.

Scenario 1: Compulsory labelling

There were mixed views on whether consumers would trust the use of compulsory labelling. A label would need to be backed by the government or the EU. Standards would need to be developed and enforced through an independent body. Consumers do not want too much detail on labels. Simple approaches including the use of colour codes and official stamps were advocated with detailed information being available on posters and leaflets at retail outlets.



Scenario 2: Minimum standards

The general idea of having a minimum standard was seen as positive. It would need to be independently run and farmers should be given licences to farm, which they would lose if they regularly failed to meet requirements. Standards need to be above a minimum standard, as this would probably be set at too low a level.

Scenario 3: Change in agricultural policy

This could work if farmers were paid more to increase standards. Those on the minimum standard should get no payments or minimum payments. Re-education of farmers on positive animal welfare systems was also advocated. Consumers felt that this option might encourage more intensive production and it would probably be opposed by the farm organisations.

Scenario 4: Education of consumers

This met with unanimous favour. Participants felt that educational packages should be available for everybody, children and adults, in a variety of media.

Scenario 5: Voluntary code of practice

The use of this option was mainly viewed as a starting point. If it was linked to incentives it would offer farmers an opportunity to become less intensive on a voluntary basis but ultimately it should become compulsory. Consumers questioned whether the industry could be trusted to ensure that the standards were enforced.

Ideal Scenario

The ideal scenario is a scheme that may initially be voluntary but ultimately becomes compulsory, organised and managed by the EU, with a common logo. There was a strong view additionally that the industry must comply with higher standards and that standards should be enforced rigorously. This enforcement is necessary for consumer confidence and credibility. Additionally, information on the scheme should be generally available to the public and promoted. Consumer education on how food is produced from animal based food products is also a prerequisite, as consumers themselves feel they have insufficient knowledge of food production and wish to be better informed.



CONCLUSIONS

- Generally, consumers are more concerned about other food issues than about animal welfare. Concern was more about animal disease than the welfare of the animals.
- When prompted participants in all the groups showed more concern. In particular, they identified concerns about egg, poultry and veal production and, in general, a concern about animals having little space.
- The term animal welfare has a variety of meanings for the consumer.
- Trust was a major issue for consumers in the focus groups. Most consumers were of the opinion that responsibility for animal welfare lay with environmental and animal welfare organisations, veterinarians and the farmers themselves rather than with consumers.
- Veal crates were perceived as the cruellest of all the systems shown and everyone felt they should be banned. While consumers favoured less intensive systems they were pragmatic and accepted that in some situations these would be unrealistic.
- While Irish consumers have a variety of animal welfare concerns, some concerns are of greater importance and are mentioned more frequently. In this regard, some of the most frequently mentioned animal welfare attributes are access to space, outdoor access, and appropriateness of feed, feed additives, slaughtering methods and animal transportation.
- In terms of self-relevant consumer values, it is evident that two values are of most importance to Irish consumers namely, ethics and their desire to live a long, healthy life. In the present context, ethics is predominantly linked to cruelty to animals and the distress that consumers feel when they believe animals are being mistreated. The desire to live a long healthy life relates to consumers concerns about their health.
- The majority of a representative sample of Irish consumers are consuming meat, only about one per cent do not eat any meat or poultry products.



- Four out of ten consumers changed their consumption of a range of animal derived food products over the last five years.
- The greatest decrease in consumption was in beef, with four out of ten consumers eating less beef than they were five years ago. Conversely, consumption of poultry had increased, with one in four eating more poultry now than five years ago.
- The most prevalent reason for changing consumption was concern about health and well being.
- Only 3% of consumers spontaneously mentioned animal welfare and animal related ethical reasons as the main reason for changing consumption compared to over three-quarters when prompted.
- Type of feed, amount of space and outdoor access were considered by respondents to be the most important aspect of production in relation to the welfare of animals.
- Consumers trust friends and family above all other sources of information on farm animal welfare. Butchers were seen by the consumer survey as a reasonable source of trustworthy information, supporting findings from the focus group research. In addition, farmers were considered to be less trustworthy and the government the least trustworthy source of all.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SECTOR

The following recommendations are based not only on the results of the Irish research but also on the results of the other research partners¹ and their collective views on how this sector may be developed.

Policies devised to address consumer concerns about animal welfare need to address a number of important issues. Consumers are interested in animal standards for two main reasons: the impact on the well being of the animals, and the impact on food safety, quality and healthiness. These effects are viewed as interdependent. Reported high levels of concern (see for example MLC, 1996; Diestre, 1993; von Albensleben, 1988; 1989; 1994; Fiddes, 1991; Webster, 1995a; 1995b) do not translate into food choice. This should not be interpreted as a lack of consumer concern, but as an indicator that barriers are preventing consumers from exercising their food choice preferences.

There is lack of information. The dissonance that exists between the consumer's desire for additional information and information overload on labels needs to be addressed. A public information campaign to inform consumers about the ways in which animals are produced in the EU should be undertaken. This information should focus on food safety and quality issues. In addition, it should provide information on inspection and enforcement schemes.

There is also lack of availability of choice. As consumers become more informed about animal production in the EU, demand for more extensively produced food may increase, however, this will be subject to affordable prices and comprehensive labelling.

Consumers should perceive that they have influence. Consumers should be encouraged to acknowledge their role in current animal welfare standards and advised of ways in which they can assist in improving standards.

Although consumers rated cost the least important barrier, it clearly has an important impact on food choice. Indeed, it is well known that consumers would rather attribute food choice to other factors. Consumers state that they are willing to pay more for improved animal welfare, yet such statements



rarely translate into practice. Policies devised to address cost need to take into account that although consumers say they are willing to pay, invariably they do not. The cost of improved animal welfare may need to be viewed as the cost for a public good which, although paid for by the taxpayer, is subsumed under general agricultural financial support rather than differentiated product prices. This requires EU agricultural policy to provide incentives and rewards for farmers to convert to higher standards of animal welfare without passing on direct costs to consumers, which may only serve as barriers to purchase.

Policies, at EU level, that support more animal friendly systems are likely to become more important in the future. Thus, production systems that can improve the important welfare issues of consumer concern including feed inputs, amount of space and outdoor access, need to be evaluated and introduced as appropriate. A wider range of food products from animal friendly systems on the retail shelf will help reassure consumers that the sector is serious about this issue.

The lack of trust in farmers, supermarkets and government on information issues illustrates the need for ongoing action on safety-related issues, to restore credibility in the sector.

¹ Project partners include: Dr Gemma Harper, University of Reading, United Kingdom; Dr Spencer Henson, University of Guelph, Canada; Dr Arouna Ouédraogo, Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique, Paris, France; Dr Mara Miele and Ms Vittoria Parisi, Università Degli Studi di Pisa, Italy; Professor Reimar von Alvensleben and Mr Florian Köhler, Christian Albrechts Universitaet zu Kiel, Germany; Mr Mick Sloyan, Meat and Livestock Commission, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom; Ms Sonja van Tichelen and Dr David Wilkes, Eurogroup for Animal Welfare, Brussels, Belgium; Mr John Keane, Bord Bia, Dublin, Ireland.



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