Animal welfare is an area which receives more and more attention from media, NGOs, consumers and politicians. In order to meet the expectations from the surrounding society, animal industries must meet the public concerns openly, demonstrate transparency, and have a continued focus on improving welfare conditions.

We commented on scientific reviews that were consulted into potential welfare issues and potential welfare indicators. They were all detailed, scholarly, published throughout a number of work, and were of public health quality. Their analyses of the key issues, and of the validity, reliability and practicality of the various potential welfare indicators available, were very thoughtful and robust. The relative merits of animal-based indicators versus resource-based measures were well appreciated (animal-based measures being favored wherever possible, a decision we support). Overall, these reviews provided a firm scientific foundation for all subsequent welfare assessment systems. These were all detailed, scholarly, involved hundreds of persons and were of publishable quality. Their analyses of the key issues, and of the validity, reliability and practicality of the various potential welfare indicators available, were very thoughtful and robust. The relative merits of animal-based indicators versus resource-based measures were well appreciated (animal-based measures being favored wherever possible, a decision we support). Overall, these reviews provided a firm scientific foundation for all subsequent welfare assessment systems.

With that in mind, Fur Europe initiated the WelFur programme in 2009, and the finalised protocols were printed in 2013 and 2014. WelFur is a farm level animal welfare certification programme, and the programme is based on the methodology of the European Commission’s Welfare Quality project, which is widely recognised as one of the world’s most comprehensive welfare assessment systems.

Within the principles Good Feeding, Good Health and Appropriate Behaviour, the WelFur project defined 12 specific animal welfare criteria. Below the 12 criteria is a number of welfare measurements which are species specific and must consider the biology of the animal species.

Animal welfare can be a difficult concept to pin down, and most people have their own personal views. Despite this, there is general agreement within the scientific community about what represents good animal welfare. This consensus is reflected in the four welfare principles established in the European Commission’s Welfare Quality project: Good Feeding, Good Health, Good Housing and Appropriate Behaviour.

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Practical use of WelFur

The strength of WelFur as an animal welfare assessment system is its comprehensive approach to animal welfare, which is measured methodologically and from various angles. At present, animal welfare assessment on European fur farms is typically performed by national authorities who mainly look for compliance with legislation. However, if the animal is not thirsty, why a resource-based measure is preferred to an animal-based measure?

When the baseline is established, the farm assessment is reduced to once a year, but in three consequent years the assessment is performed during different periods in order to take the biological lifecycle of fur animals into consideration.

Objectives of WelFur

Fur Europe suggests that WelFur serve as scientific reference for regulation and control of European fur farms, and that the programme serves as an asset to the European Commission’s work on the development of a pan-European animal welfare framework law.

The WelFur protocols will be renewed every five years based on a revision of the current protocols, recommendations of external reviewers and new scientific data from the assessments.

It is the aim to increase the number of animal-based measures in the future.

Transparency for the public

On an annual basis, Fur Europe publishes reports with relevant data from the assessments. These reports provide the general public with a reliable insight into the welfare standards on European fur farms.

WELFUR

SCIENCE-BASED ANIMAL WELFARE ASSESSMENT

Ethics

Through annual reviews, including visits, placed a major part in the development of the original WelFur (Welfare Fur) project, ethical issues are not specifically addressed in the WelFur protocols. However, parallel to WelFur, Fur Europe has set up an Ethical Committee to focus on ethical issues in the European fur farming sector. Considering more than animal welfare and the value of animals, and various moral views, the committee can point out ethical gaps in the fur production. Ultimately, the European Commission’s work on the development of a pan-European animal welfare framework law.