

Welfare scenario in South America: norms and regulation

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Summary

Animal welfare related issues have been intensely discussed in the last years due to regulatory reform that is taking place in industrialized countries. Trade policy has been driven to the need of regulation and the World Trade Organization (WTO) delegated the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) for developing guidelines that could be used as international standards. However, trade disputes on animal welfare are not likely to be resolved under the scope of OIE, and access to international market may be questioned on the grounds of norms dictated by industrialized countries that do not necessarily reflects the reality of animal production in emerging economies countries, such as those in South America. This paper presents an overall view of basic welfare issues and points out specific items related to the actual scenario of norms and regulations that are being implemented in South America, where there is a rather large poultry production.

Keywords: international trade; welfare policies; competitiveness; developing countries

Introduction

Animal well being related concerns are not a new theme. Some of the ancient religious rules for slaughtering animals were originally intended to reduce the animal pain. Many cults, including Native American religions, Hinduism, and Australian aboriginal tradition, have held some animals to be sacred, and have devised particular rules about whether and how such animals were to be used for food or service. However, during the last twenty years consumer groups, mostly in industrialized nations, have brought much more attention to this topic. Animal welfare is not a term that arose in livestock science to express a scientific concept; it arose in western civilization through society to enhance ethical concern regarding the treatment of farm animals, and lately it called global attention for two reasons: first, the public association to the animal's sentience, and second, the producers reaction as it should be considered as a trade restriction.

According to Mc Inerney (2004), there is no escaping the fact that the economic role of farm animals is to deliver benefits to consumers in terms of food products. The well being of an animal is clearly a multi variable outcome and a large series of factors may contribute to it such as nutrition, health, pain, discomfort, freedom, etc. Even though the primary role of agricultural animals is for human food consumption, and the level of inputs such as fodder, housing, disease control and environment management has reached a high degree of technology driven success, the production process has been pushed to their biological limits and there is an increasing challenge to meet their well being, or yet human-perceived welfare (Dawkins, 2003; Mc Inerney, 2004).

Poultry production is an important economical income for South American countries, and it is also an accessible low cost meat largely consumed in Latin America. Brazil is amongst the five largest poultry producers in the world (Figure 1), and its neighboring

countries have significant production proportional to their capacity of producing or importing grains (Figure 2). This paper briefly discusses the welfare issues related to poultry production which has been dealt in South American countries, and states the bases of norms and regulations that have been proposed by associations and government in order to face trade demands.

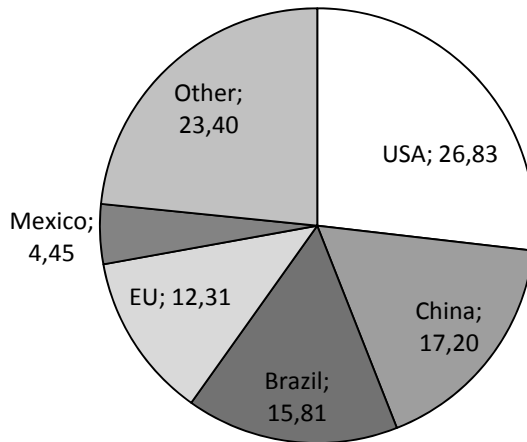


Figure 1. World fifth largest poultry producer countries and the respective percentages related to the total production worldwide. Source: ABEF (2007)

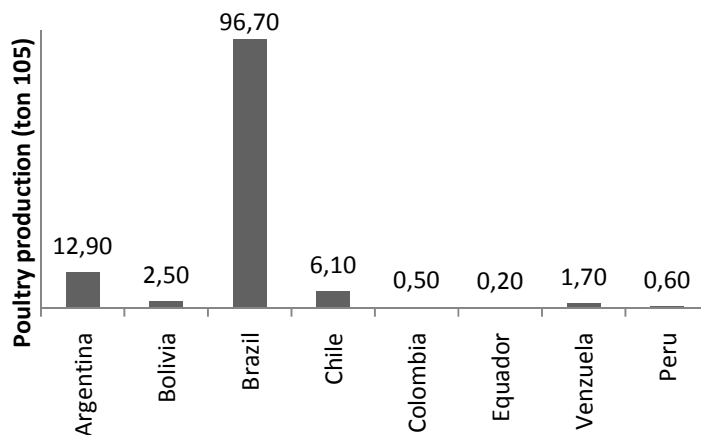


Figure 2. Most important poultry producer countries in South America, and their respective annual production. Source: FENAVI (2009); FENAV (2009); ASPROCER (2009); APA (2009).

Global improvement in animal welfare

Animal production in developing countries has been submitted to great pressure to meet the increasing demand for protein required by the growing population, at the expense of water pollution, land degradation and ultimately deforestation (Bellaver & Bellaver, 1999). Thus, the concern with improvements in animal production needs to include a wide variety of topics amongst them animal welfare. Even though the World Trade Organization (WTO) has not explicitly recognized animal welfare as a legitimate cause for impeding trade, the EU has advocated the issue of animal welfare on the agenda for international negotiations. In the other hand, the member countries of the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) agreed on developing general guidelines for animal welfare in relation to slaughter, transportation and the killing of animals for disease control purposes. For the coming years, even though desired, it cannot be expected that the OIE will promptly provide comprehensive global standards on animal welfare at farm level, and this will leave the meat production countries without specific international guidance other than recognized directives or good practices manuals.

Laws, norms and regulations dealing with farm animal welfare are understood as representing an important economic impact motivation on production costs, and as having potential effects on international trade. Animal welfare laws regulating the treatment of farm animals used for agricultural production have been in existence in most South American countries for some time, and are part of the legal code of a number of nations, although some laws simply generally prohibit cruelty to animals, including farm animals. Several industrialized countries have generated a regulatory reform, mainly due to consumers' demands and afterwards reinforced by governmental regulation in some regions, and further on by private certification agencies. As a direct consequence the demands towards animal welfare have increased along with other issues regarding international trade such as avoidance of children labor and the adoption of environmental friendly production (EUREPGAP, 2005; Van Horne and Achterbosch, 2008).

Traditionally, animal agriculture was widely viewed as a form of independent enterprise involving a close relationship between people, animals and nature. With the increase of animal agriculture, animal production has come to be perceived, correctly or incorrectly, more as an industrial, technological and corporate-owned activity. This change in public perception has resulted in greater ethical questioning of food production and a greater willingness to see standards imposed on the industry. The different views on the welfare subject arise partly because people differ in the value they attach to different aspects of it. For instance, the intensive producer sees a high level of health and growth as of such importance that it warrants some restriction of movement; while the free-range producer sees access to the outdoors as so important that it warrants some exposure to harsh weather. It would be comforting to think that science could arbitrate among these different views of animal welfare, and demonstrate which are scientifically valid and which are not. Up to now a tradition of scientific research has grown up around each of the different views for subsidizing future decisions (Mitchell, 2001).

As animal rearing is rather distinct in South America due to climatic conditions, some management items stated in specific regulations from for instance the EU, such as flock density or ammonia concentration, does not necessarily reflect the way the birds are reared. Open houses and the use of natural ventilation most of the time provide better air quality inside housing than equivalent in temperate climate countries. Thus, appropriate rearing demands need specific adaptation when required in trade agreements. This is a

clear opportunity for researchers all over the world and especially in South American countries to design better housing and handling facilities and to address properly animal welfare issues (Fraser, 2008).

Norms and regulations in South American poultry producer countries

Brazil is the largest poultry producer in the region, followed by Argentina, Chile and Bolivia, and yet the review of the governmental/state norms and regulations regarding animal welfare has been taken seriously as it should. As a certain portion of Brazilian production is destined for export, the companies have been adopting international trade rules such as the ones dictated by GLOBALGAP¹. The norms that are often followed in most countries are those published in the manuals of good practices, where there are clear limitations with respect to animal welfare. Like the other countries in the region, Brazilian legislation is outdated and it does not specifically address animal welfare issues (Brasil, 1998; Dias, 2000). In the last two years there have been national organizations efforts in order to develop new guidance, more detailed on farm animal welfare management, and some agri-businesses are making company policy changes from within on how their animals are housed.

In yearly 2007, a group of study leded by OIE was established gathering representative of countries members in the Americas, with the purpose of establishing appropriate regulations. In August 2008, this group met for the first time in Panama to start building up some lines which would be the guidance for all the region countries members. Some topics among fuzzy themes were discussed and agreed, such as:

- Animal welfare is one of the relevant components to warranty an adequate flock/herd health and performance;
- Animal welfare is a relevant aspect of public opinion with important impacts in the consumers demands;
- OIE has included animal welfare in its Strategic Plan and it is the only international organization in charge of coordinating the development of international standards; and
- There is a clear preoccupation of the producers regarding private norms² which do not necessarily agree with the OIE standards and provoke negative impact in the production and commerce of animal products; and that
- The priority in animal welfare issues related to beef and dairy cattle production will prevail over other species.

From the scope of this list it is clear that the awareness in actually getting to the bottom of the topics is quite low, and the disperse way the proposal has been made simply shows how the delegates (both international and national, as the national representatives are governmental agents) from the region are neglecting the subject. A study was carried out to compare Brazilian welfare regulation in animal production, with the EU, USA and Australia, and the results indicated that when compared to the counterpart's Brazilian regulation detained the lowest score for all types of demands related to rearing, handling and transportation (Silva, 2007). There is an urgent need to invest in updated animal

¹ GLOBALGAP is a private sector body that sets voluntary standards for the certification of agricultural products around the globe.

² Although not specified, it is referred to GLOBALGAP, private company and fast food restaurants norms.

welfare norms and legislation in order to maintaining the region's international competitiveness.

Final remarks

It is quite recognized in most South American countries that all individuals involved in the business of keeping animals for food have a huge responsibility in making sure that their animals are housed, raised, transported and processed with care, but none refers to these actions as "humanely". The animal livestock industries has accepted (with some restrictions due to the increase in production cost and the consequent loss of competitiveness in international trade) the fact that they will need to be on the forefront of the welfare issues that pertain to their industry and, in addition, will need to show increasing accountability back to their customers and consumers that farm animal welfare is of critical importance. It is clear that, even though governments and regulatory agencies have delayed in establishing proper and adapted regulations, under the political pressure of meat industries, the OIE study group for the Americas is pushing the debate of this subject.

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