The impact of legislation and assurance schemes on alternative systems for poultry welfare

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Whereas a wide range of policy instruments - legal, economic, education and publicity - are available to effect changes in production systems, legislation and market-led assurance schemes have been the main forces used to protect and enhance the welfare of farm animals. The Conventions of the Council of Europe (COE) and their Recommendations focussed on the provisions of resources and duty of care to meet the needs of animals. They are part of the aquis of the European Union (EU) and are incorporated into some national legislations as well as being used as the basis for private standards. The European single market harmonised welfare and health rules, methods of production and labelling for hen’s eggs and chicken meat, so allowing consumers to buy foods with known provenance. The EU responded with a legal framework from “farm to fork” to secure food safety, animal health and welfare. Farmers, food processors and large retailers sought to provide evidence of the quality of their products by private assurance schemes not only to meet new obligations for due diligence and gain commercial advantage. These schemes often merely reflected minimum legal standards but some also focussed on improved health, welfare or environmental provisions. Membership of assurance schemes is associated with better compliance with legal standards in Great Britain. The EU WELFARE QUALITY project concluded that assurance schemes usually had impact only at a niche market level. The EU ban on conventional cages for hens in 2012 has had the greatest political and economic impact on poultry in Europe. Some countries have banned enriched cages ahead of the deadline, despite scientific evidence that supported continued use of enriched cages. New EU legislation to improve the quality of care of intensively-kept meat chickens was novel in limiting stocking densities by measuring welfare outcomes at abattoirs. The COE Recommendations on geese, turkeys, ducks and Muscovies have been implemented by national rules and private codes of practice which are often used to support assurance schemes. Major impacts have been on traditional systems through the ban on live plucking of feathers from geese and on gavage and individual cages for the production of foie gras.