Sheep and wool – a welfare perspective

Introduction

People have kept sheep for their wool since the Stone Age and across the world today there are more than 200 different breeds. Whether fine-woolled like a Merino or long-woolled like a Romney sheep are a sustainable source of a unique fibre that is naturally insulating, biodegradable, flame-resistant and self-replenishing.

We have decided to dedicate a special issue of the Animal Welfare newsletter to explore the welfare of wool sheep in the EU and beyond. To look at how the EU Commission with the FAO and EFSA have been co-operating since 2010. We introduce the wool industry’s recently published guidelines on sheep welfare and examine the key issues in sheep welfare policy. We also look at what happens on farms and at how the “Five Freedoms” of animal welfare are put into practice.

The EU explores options to improve sheep welfare.

Sheep farming for milk, meat and wool production is of importance worldwide, and not least in the EU, where welfare concerns figure prominently, and are constantly under review.

No specific EU rules on farming of sheep currently exist, but minimum standards for protection of all animals kept for farming purposes were set by Council Directive 98/58/EC. Even earlier, in 1992, recommendations relating to sheep were adopted, under the European Convention on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes.

Looking ahead, a revised animal welfare framework is foreseen in the EU’s 2012–2015 strategy for the protection and welfare of animals. The revised framework will introduce the use of animal-based welfare indicators so that the general principles applicable to all farm animals take fuller account of individual species. These indicators are under current scientific development thanks to an ongoing EU funded project called AWIN.

Meanwhile, at an international level, there is a generalised move towards more sustainable livestock production policies and farming practices and in particular to the development of guidelines and codes of practice addressing sheep welfare. The EU plays a role here, too – such as through the recent joint initiative of the European Commission (DG SANCO) and the International Wool and Textile Organisation to support the creation of a guideline for best practices for welfare of wool-producing animals.

Efforts towards enhanced welfare for sheep have to take account of the widely varying production systems from region to region, even within the EU. It is even possible that sheep on the same farm can be reared in different conditions. Dairy sheep farming techniques range from extensive to very intensive. And breeds – and the related welfare issues – can also vary across regions, and under the influence of factors such as nutrition and environment.

Consequently, in June 2013 the Commission requested the European Food Safety Authority to review the scientific literature on the welfare of sheep farmed for wool, meat and milk production. This work is aimed at assessing the main risk factors linked to different farming methods following the risk assessment methodology on animal welfare developed by EFSA. EFSA will identify the main factors influencing the welfare of sheep and animal–based measures. During the process of developing the opinion, EFSA is also planning to consult main stakeholders engaged in sheep welfare.

Adoption of an opinion based on this scientific assessment is expected by the end of 2014.

¹ More about the Animal Welfare Indicators project can be found at: http://www.animal-welfare-indicators.net/site/
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Wool, as the natural protein fibre produced from sheep, is a renewable resource – around 2.1 million tonnes of raw wool are produced by more than 1 billion sheep around the world, with around 97 million sheep in the European Union alone.

Wool is formed within the skin from around 20 types of amino acids, and around 50% of the dry weight of clean wool is pure organic carbon, derived from the normal atmospheric carbon cycle.

While durable in normal wear, wool is readily and rapidly biodegradable in active soil.

Each of the 200 different sheep breeds produces distinct types of wool, from the very fine wool for clothing to the coarser wool used in carpets and furnishings such as curtains or bedding.

A single sheep will offer around 4.5 kg of wool per year, the equivalent of 10 or more metres of fabric – sufficient for around 6 sweaters, 3 suit and trouser combinations, or to cover a large sofa or 15 chairs.

Wool products are prized for recycling and re-use – so that a wool product can often have multiple ‘lives’ in different useful forms. Although wool represents less than 2% of the global fibre market, it makes up around 4% of the recycled fibre in UK, for example.

Did you know? Facts about sheep and wool

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International Guidelines for Welfare of Wool Sheep

The wool textile industry is committed to the highest standards of sheep care and wellbeing, and to ensuring that the best practices in sheep welfare are recognised throughout the wool supply chain.

However, a recognised challenge for the industry is that sheep and wool production is highly disaggregated – its 1 billion sheep are located across some 200,000 major and several million minor enterprises, across more than 100 countries – and not all countries yet have well defined frameworks for animal welfare practice.

Recognising this challenge, the International Wool Textile Organisation (IWTO), the globally recognised authority for standards in the industry, recently published a set of guidelines for wool sheep welfare. These guidelines have been developed taking into account the contribution from the experts of the EU Commission and FAO.

Premised on the Five Freedoms², the IWTO Guidelines for Wool Sheep Welfare define best animal welfare practices in wool production, relevant to the wide diversity of wool production environments around the globe. The Guidelines also provide a useful resource for development of local frameworks, where these are needed.

In 2010 the Prince of Wales – the heir to the British throne – launched the Campaign for Wool with the purpose of renewing interest in and creating a greater awareness of wool’s environmental credentials. Of equal importance to the campaign is the preservation of sustainable practices on farms for the benefit of the rural community, the animals and the consumer.

Why did IWTO develop sheep welfare guidelines for the international wool industry?

The fashion and retail sectors are now, as a matter of course, asking textile manufacturers ever more searching questions about provenance, origin and sustainability. Animal welfare and caring for the land are increasingly important elements in areas relating to corporate social responsibility. IWTO is the recognised global authority for manufacturing standards in the wool textile industry and we are fully aware that we are working in an area where sustainable practices need to be transparent at all stages in the pipeline. Animal welfare is very much a part of this process.

How are the guidelines embedded within the industry?

I was delighted that so many grower countries contributed to the preparation of this document, which will be of significant assistance to spinners and weavers working closely with downstream manufacturers in the global market. The route from farm to fashion crosses many borders where standards of manufacturing excellence and corporate social responsibility need to respond to the expectations of increasingly vigilant consumers. Our intention is that these guidelines provide a ready resource for anyone interested in the applicable standards for wool sheep production globally, and for those interested in development or refinement of individual country codes. It will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

For more information about the IWTO Guidelines for Wool Sheep Welfare, visit http://www.iwto.org/wool/animal-welfare/

Every farmer wants to see his animals prosper and do well: sheep farming in Kent, United Kingdom

Good animal health and welfare contribute to sound farm economics as well as optimum results in livestock. Farmers want to ensure maximum returns on their investments, and wool farmers are no exception.

The healthiest sheep produce the best quality wool, so to meet the standards required by the textile industry, wool farmers are committed to keeping their sheep healthy and to providing a high standard of welfare.

“Every farmer wants to see his animals prosper and do well,” says Trevor Richards, a third-generation farmer Kent, in the south east of England. Mr Richards has a mixed arable and sheep farm with 400 breeding sheep, half Suffolk crosses and half pure Romneys. His farm has always had sheep. He looks after them every day, and their welfare is a top priority.

One of his principal concerns is that his sheep have enough food. Sheep are free range animals, ruminants, and are happy to graze outdoors. Mr Richards relies on grass to nourish his sheep, and ensures that there are fresh pastures as part of his schedule of rotation. Fresh grass provides essential nutrition, with sheep needing supplements of feed only when the weather is too dry or too wet, and in late winter, prior to lambing, when the sheep are brought into shelters.

After lambing, the sheep return to good spring grass, which is especially nourishing for the lambs. With both grass and milk from the ewe, most lambs require little additional care.

Another major daily concern for a sheep farmer is illness. Illness can be difficult to detect, even if a farmer sees his sheep every day. Farmers will vaccinate and drench sheep on a regular basis to protect them against disease. “Every farmer I know wants his animals treated properly, and does not want to see them suffering. If they don’t look well,” Mr Richards says, “I do something about it.”

While there are financial motives in farming, this is not the only concern. There is a close connection between welfare of the farmer and welfare of the sheep. “Because you build up a flock of sheep over years,” says Mr Richards, “you have an emotional tie to them. They’re part of your life. They’re part of your business. They’re important to you.”

Although only a small proportion of Mr Richards’ income comes from wool, he still finds it an “amazing” product and an important one. As the welfare of a sheep is directly reflected in the quantity and quality of its fleece – and therefore the price it will fetch – welfare naturally is a major issue for diligent farmers.
Shearing – part of sheep’s overall welfare

Wool grows naturally on sheep – it is a product of the skin, used to protect the skin – and it grows more or less continuously during the year.

The wool grown by a sheep during the year is called a ‘fleece’, and it is removed through a process called ‘shearing’ – practitioners of this highly skilled pursuit are called ‘shearers’.

In Europe, sheep are sheared either in the early summer months, or immediately prior to winter housing.

Shearing is necessary to prevent the sheep from overheating either when indoors, or when outside during hot months. When shorn, sheep are also much less susceptible to the parasites that nest in the wool.

Shearing is a skilled procedure: the British Wool Marketing Board, for example, trains approximately 1200 shearers every year. Many of these trained shearers ply their trade globally, working throughout the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and New Zealand. Almost all shearing nowadays is performed by trained shearers.

Shearing is a painless exercise for the sheep. According to Colin MacGregor, Shearing Manager at the British Wool Marketing Board, “the modern method is very easy on the animal, and easy on the shearer as well.” But he recognises that the first time a sheep is sheared it doesn’t understand what is going on, and can get fidgety. “It is like a young child’s first haircut”, he says. But, he adds, in good hands the animal is calmed and there is no harm done.

Indeed, most animals are happy to get out from under the several kilos of wool that they have grown. In fact it is more of a problem if they are not shorn. Too much wool attracts insects and makes the sheep sweaty and itchy in hot weather. They might try to scratch their backs by lying down – and then find it hard to get back up again.

In cool weather, on the other hand, wool keeps the sheep warm and sheds rain. So caring for the wool is not just about creating a product. It is also part of ensuring the sheep’s overall welfare.

Improving the welfare of sheep through R&D

A reflection of the commitment of the industry to the health and welfare of sheep is the investment by industry in research and development.

Australian Wool innovation (AWI) sees breech fly strike as the highest on-farm R&D priority, and has invested over AUD26m (€18 m) investigating it since 2005, among a much wider range of investments aimed at combating internal and external parasites and predation.

Some of these long-term investment streams are yielding technologies that could improve the way livestock agriculture is practised globally. One example is the development of low cost, topical analgesic sprays for routine on-farm surgical procedures. At the recent IWTO Congress in Biella, Italy, Dr Sabrina Lomax of the University of Sydney summarised the results of a research programme into the efficacy of a topical spray containing short- and long-term anaesthetics with antiseptic compounds.

On-going research funded is exploring development of practical, low cost pre-operative analgesia options, and novel delivery mechanisms to make application simple and painless for farmers and sheep alike. These long-term pharmacological research programmes are high-risk, but their potential contribution to wider animal health and wellbeing is great.