

ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE IN FREE RANGE CATTLE – A SURVEY OF FARMS IN WESTERN SWEDEN

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Introduction

Keeping cattle in open pasture all the year round may be an inexpensive way of beef production, which also promotes the biodiversity of rural areas (Kumm, 2002). However, in order to maintain a good animal health, the management system must provide the animals with sufficient feed and water, as well as appropriate shelter. Such an extensive system may tempt the farmers to neglect necessary supervision of the animals. Furthermore, in the public debate in Sweden it has been questioned if shelters are needed or even used by the animals. Concern for poor animal welfare in such systems made the Veterinary administration in the County of Västra Götaland to initiate initiated an investigation of animal welfare in farms in the area.

The aim of the study was to investigate farms with free range cattle and evaluate their compliance to the animal welfare statutes.

Material and Methods

The study was carried out during the Winter of 2002. The local animal welfare inspectors were asked to inspect and score conditions at farms with free range animals, during the period of January to March 2002.

The questionnaire contained 55 questions; general information about the farm, housing conditions, water and feeding equipment as well as scoring of animal health (for details see, Gunnarsson et al., 2003; 2004). The questionnaire was designed to score how well the farmers were complying with the Swedish animal welfare legislation, as well as to get information about the further handling by the authorities (SFS:534, 1988a; SFS:539, 1988b; SJVFS:6, 2003).

In total 255 questionnaires were returned from 32 out of the 49 local administrations in the County. Seventy-five percent of the farms had cattle, 19% had sheep and 5% had both cattle and sheep. The median size of cattle stock was 13 animals (minimum 2; maximum 274) and for sheep 26 adults (minimum 4; maximum 549). This paper focuses solely on the animal health and welfare of free range cattle, and in total there were 204 questionnaires covering the conditions for cattle.

Results and discussion

In general the animal health was good (Fig. 1). In 11% of the farms occasional animals were lean and in 2% of the farms >50% were lean. In 5% of the farms >50% of the

animals were dirty, and in these farms the animals had no access to an indoor lying area, the lying area was too small or the bedding was wet and dirty. In all farms where the indoor area was sufficiently large and had a dry, clean bedding the animals were using the area for resting.

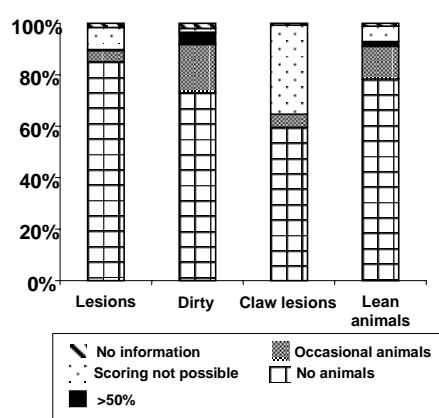


Figure 1. Scoring of animal health in 204 herds with free range cattle in the County of Western of Sweden.

Most farms were feeding animals using feed-racks or feed troughs, 13 % fed the animals on the ground outside with no other facilities. The animals had access to water in water troughs or bathtubs in 83% of the farms. In 17 % of the farms the animals could only find water at streams or a pond, and in 41 % of these farms the animals could not get water of acceptable quality.

One third of the farms did not have a separate pen for calving, and 50 % of the farms were lacking escape areas for the calves, which are compulsory according to the Swedish animal welfare legislation.

In 79% no pre-examination of the farm building plans had been carried out commissioned by the regional authorities, although this is compulsory according to the Swedish animal welfare legislation.

The animal welfare inspectors reported that 38 % of all farms were found to be in full compliance to the legislation, and in 40 % some kind of action were taken; 31 % got oral remarks, 30 % got written remarks and 4 % got injunctions (Fig 2). The most common reasons for injunctions were to improve the housing and to give the animals sufficiently access to feed and water.

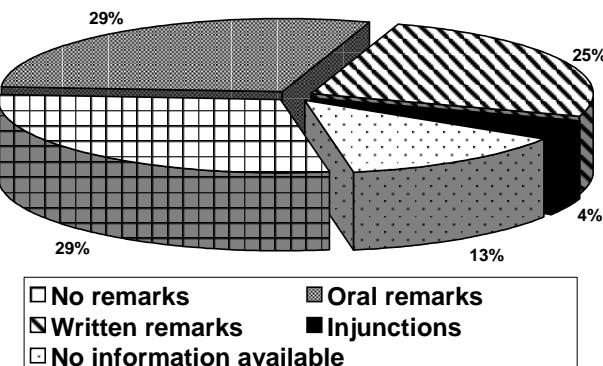


Figure 2. Remarks at animal welfare inspections 204 herd with free range cattle in the County of Western of Sweden. Please notice that more than one option was possible for each farm.

The results of this study were similar to previous reports from other parts of Sweden and from the UK (Askerblad & Jonsson, 2002; Gunnarsson et al, 2002; Sandberg, 2003; Pritchard et al., 2003).

Conclusion

In general the animal health was good, but a few farms had animals that were lean and/or dirty. At farms that had dirty cattle, the animals did not have access to an appropriate indoor lying area. Furthermore it was found that in farms where the indoor area was sufficiently large and clean, the animals were resting indoor. This means that appropriate shelter during the Winter is necessary to maintain acceptable animal health and welfare.

Thirteen percent of the farms were offering feed solely on the ground. In 17% of the farms the animals had no other water supply than streams, often with unacceptable water quality. In 79% of the farms no pre-examination of the building plans had been carried out, although this is compulsory in Sweden.

Only one fifth of the farms had pre-examined their building plans, which is compulsory according to Swedish animal welfare legislation. The inspectors reported that 40% of the farms did not fully comply with the Swedish animal welfare statutes.

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