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A COMMENTARY ON ANIMAL WELFARE IN THE US MEAT AND POULTRY INDUSTRY

Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort

Abstract

The welfare of farm animals continues to generate vociferous and passionate debate. For many people, their closest, though indirect, contact with animal welfare is through the food they buy, and then, eat, and though animal welfare seems removed from the social practice of buying and eating animal products, it is very much a public issue. This short commentary paper looks to shine some light on animal welfare by reviewing, and reflecting on, how some of the leading meat and poultry producing companies in the US address animal welfare in their annual sustainability reports. The paper reveals that while most of the leading meat and chicken producing companies within the US emphasised their strategic commitment to animal welfare, their commitments are contested, and there are issues about how these commitments are evidenced.

Keywords Animal welfare: meat and poultry producing companies; public issue; sustainability reports; auditing.

Introduction

The welfare of farm animals continues to generate vociferous and passionate debate, and it has attracted increasing attention in the academic and professional literature. Clark et al. (2016), for example, recognised that increases in productivity may have negative impacts on farm animal welfare in modern animal production systems, and provided a systematic review of public attitudes to farm animal welfare. Their review suggested that *'the public are concerned about farm animal welfare in modern production systems'* and that *'naturalness and humane treatment were central to what was considered good welfare'* (Clark et al. 2016). While consumer concerns about animal welfare are expressed in a variety of ways, for many people their closest, though indirect, contact with animal welfare is through the food they buy, and then eat. That said, while animal welfare is very much a public issue, it seems removed from the social practices of buying, cooking, and eating animal products. Buller and Roe (2018), for example, claimed *'we largely take farm animals' lives (and deaths) for granted when we eat them and their products'* and they suggested *'for most of us, meat, egg and dairy consumption has become so distinct – geographically, morally aesthetically - from livestock, that the animal disappears.'* With these comments in mind, this short commentary paper looks to shine some light on animal welfare by reviewing, and reflecting on, how some of the leading meat and poultry producing companies in the US address animal welfare in their annual sustainability reports.

Animal Welfare

Animal welfare is concerned with the general health and wellbeing of animals and spans a wider range of issues from the care of family pets to the exploitation and abuse of animals. The welfare of animals generates fiercely contested debates and while some voices stress the vulnerability of animals, for example, in intensive factory farms and medical

research, others emphasise the need to increase food supplies and to develop new and better medicines. Essentially, the concept of animal welfare is concerned with how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives, and it is generally seen to include three elements, namely, an animal's normal biological functioning; its emotional state; and its ability to express normal behaviours.

As such, an animal is seen to be in *'a good state of welfare if (as indicated by scientific evidence) it is healthy, comfortable, well-nourished, safe, able to express innate behavior, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress'* (American Veterinary Medical Association 2020). The so called Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare, formalised by the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council in 1979, are freedom from hunger or thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury or disease; freedom to express (most) normal behaviour; and freedom from fear and distress. The American Veterinary Medical Association (2020) affirmed *'ensuring animal welfare is a human responsibility that includes consideration for all aspects of animal well-being, including proper housing, management, nutrition, disease prevention and treatment, responsible care, humane handling, and, when necessary, humane euthanasia.'*

In some ways, the UK can be seen to have been a pioneer in animal welfare with legislation on the treatment of cattle dating back to the 1820's, and in more modern times the Animal Welfare Act was passed in 2007, and made owners and keepers responsible for ensuring that the welfare needs of their animals are met. These include the need *'for a suitable environment, for a suitable diet, to exhibit normal behaviour patterns, to be housed with, or apart from other animals (if applicable)'* and *'to be protected from pain, injury suffering and disease'* (GOV. UK 2019). The UK's most recent advice and guidance on protecting animal welfare on farms, in transport, at markets includes welfare regulations on poultry farming, laying hens, broiler chickens and breeder chickens, pig farming, sheep and goats, beef cattle and diary cows and deer farming.

In reviewing animal welfare on farms in the US, Mench (2008) suggested that *'there has been increasing public awareness of farm animal welfare issues and a concomitant increase in animal welfare research.'* However, at that time, Mench (2008) also argued that such increasing awareness *'has occurred more slowly in the USA than in Europe'* but it *'is now gathering momentum as the agricultural industries and food retailers write guidelines and implement animal welfare audit programs in an attempt to reassure customers that farm animals are raised and slaughtered humanely.'*

In the US, the first animal welfare laws can be traced back to the mid seventeenth century, but the 1966 Animal Welfare Act, which has been amended on several occasions, effectively forms the basis of contemporary animal welfare legislation. The Animal Welfare Act is enforced by the US Department of Agriculture along with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and the Animal Care Agency, and federal animal care standards cover humane handling, transport, housing, space, feeding, sanitation, shelter from extreme weather, and veterinary care. However, no single federal law expressly governs the treatment of animals used for food while on farms in the US, and while in some states there

is legislation to limit a range of animal husbandry practices, for a variety of reasons, this legislation often does not offer a comprehensive approach to animal welfare.

Meat and Poultry Producing Companies in the US

The US is the world's largest meat and poultry producer, and while small farms account for most farms, factory farms increasingly dominate beef, dairy, pig, chicken, and egg production. Writing over a decade ago, Mench (2008), for example, succinctly captured the situation, suggesting *'although niche markets for animal welfare friendly, or other alternatively produced animal products are also growing, the main thrust in the USA continues to be towards maintaining a cheap food supply, by increasing the intensification of livestock production practices.'* Geographically, Nebraska, Kansas, Texas, California, and Oklahoma are amongst the largest beef producing states, while Iowa, Minnesota, Illinois, North Carolina and Missouri are amongst the largest pig producing states, and large number of chickens and turkeys are produced in Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama, Minnesota and North Carolina.

The growth of large-scale meat and poultry factory farming has been accompanied by concerns about a range of environmental issues including air and water pollution and increases in greenhouse gas emissions. Food and Water Watch (2020), the non-governmental organisation which focuses upon corporate and government accountability relating to food and water, for example, claimed *'nationwide pollution from animal feeding operations threatens or impairs over 14,000 miles of rivers and streams, and 90,000 acres of lakes and ponds.'* In a similar vein, Food and Water Watch (2020) claimed that broiler chicken factories *'release a slew of toxic pollutants – including ammonia, particulate matter and endotoxins, which irritate the respiratory system and are linked to lung disease.'* At the same time, several animal welfare pressure groups have consistently made allegations about animal welfare abuses in the meat and poultry industry.

In an attempt to identify if, and how, leading meat and poultry producing companies in the US were addressing animal welfare, the top ten meat and chicken US producing companies in 2019, as listed by The National Provisioner (2020) were selected for study. Across the business world, most large companies now report on their environmental, social, and ethical commitments and achievements in annual sustainability/corporate social responsibility reports and so the authors conducted two simple Internet searches. The first for sustainability reports posted by the top ten meat and chicken producing companies and the second for reference to animal welfare within these reports. These searches revealed that eight companies, namely, JBS, Tyson Foods, Sysco, Smithfield Foods, Hormel Foods, Perdue Farms, OSI and ConAgra Brands, reported on animal welfare in their sustainability reports

JBS is the world's leading processor of beef and poultry, and it processes, prepares, packages, and delivers fresh, further-processed and value-added beef, pork, and poultry products for sale to customers in more than 105 countries. Tyson Foods is the world's second largest processor of beef, chicken and pork and is the country's largest beef exporter. Sysco concentrates on the marketing sale and distribution of food to a wide range

of food service businesses. Smithfield Foods is a pork producer and food processing company and it owns and has supply contracts with 1,500 farms in the US, and it also has facilities in Mexico and Europe. Hormel Foods produces, markets, and sells a range of food products in over 80 counties in the world. Perdue Farms is a major turkey, chicken and pork manufacturing company. OSI services the retail and food service industries and has facilities in 17 countries. ConAgra Brands is a processing company which offers products to restaurants, retailers, commercial customers, and other foodservice suppliers.

Animal Welfare Commitments and Achievements

The eight companies reported how they were addressing animal welfare in a variety of ways, but rather than describing each company's approach, the aim here is to identify, and illustrate, five sets of interlinked themes that characterise the companies' approach to animal welfare. Firstly, all the companies expressed their strategic commitment to animal welfare. Tyson Foods, for example, reported its commitment to *'continuously improve the welfare of the animals entrusted to our care', 'to be a leader in animal welfare through research, innovation and transparent communication'* and that *'caring about animals is inherent to who we are as a company. Our approach is grounded in sound science and the latest animal welfare research.'*

In a similar vein, JBS reported *'ensuring the well-being of the livestock and poultry under our care is an uncompromising commitment at JBS USA. We continually strive to improve our welfare efforts through new technologies and the implementation of standards that meet and often exceed regulatory requirements and industry guidelines.'* JBS also reported, *'we have established and implemented animal welfare policies and programs in all our business units to further promote the humane treatment of animals.'* Smithfield Foods reported *'animal care leadership has been central to our operational and business success for more than 20 years'* and Perdue Farms, simply reported *'we believe in responsibly raising animals for food.'*

Secondly, the companies reported on their relationships with their suppliers. Sysco, for example, reported that its programme to ensure that suppliers meet the company's animal welfare standards involved supplier self-assessments, unannounced third-party annual audits of suppliers' facilities, and verification audits conducted by Sysco quality assurance assessors. Perdue Farms reported that its poultry care programme *'encompasses all phases of our supply chain including breeder and hatchery operations, appropriate comfort and shelter on the farms, comprehensive healthcare and monitoring, nutrition, catching, transporting and harvesting.'* Conagra Brands reported maintaining *'ongoing dialogues with our suppliers regarding their implementation of animal welfare policies'* and *'we encourage all of them to purchase only from farms that comply with industry guidelines.'* OSI reported on investigating how technological innovation can help leverage improved animal welfare outcomes in its slaughter facilities. Hormel Foods affirmed its zero-tolerance policy towards the mistreatment of animals through abuse or neglect, while less emphatically, OSI reported that any finding of egregious abuse to animals resulted in immediate suspension or potential termination of business.

Thirdly, some companies posted cameo case studies and stories to illustrate their approach to animal welfare. Under the banner *'Raising a Healthy Turkey'* Hormel Foods, for example, used a 2-minute video clip to report on the work of Michelle Kromm, Director of Technical Services and Live Production at one of its supplier farms, which raises some 52 million birds each year. Tyson Foods provided a cameo case study of animal welfare training for its suppliers, that transport live birds, in the Ongkarak and Lamlukka districts of central Thailand. Under the banner *'Animal Care* Stories', JBS posted stories of improved animal handling and welfare initiatives at its beef production facility at Grand Island, New England and of improvements in operational practices and procedures at its supplier's chicken broiler plants in Mexico.

Fourthly, all the meat and poultry producing companies emphasised their commitment to auditing in ensuring animal welfare. JBS, for example, reported that all its production facilities were audited regularly to guarantee compliance with the company's animal welfare programmes. Here, the focus was on daily audits by the company's quality assurance employees. At the same time, JBS reported that annual third-party handling audits were undertaken at every production facility, that *'if a deficiency is identified, immediate corrective action is taken, and internal follow-up audits are scheduled until the issue is resolved'* and that *'we share corrective action strategies across the company so that all facilities can benefit from new knowledge and perspectives to drive continuous improvement in our approach to animal welfare.'*

Tyson Foods, claimed, *'through a robust animal welfare auditing strategy, we're committed to ensuring our expectations on humane care are met throughout our operations and supply chains*.' Further, Tyson Foods, reported on the audits undertaken at *'all of our U.S. chicken, beef, pork and turkey plants, as well as in our chicken hatcheries'* which included *'a combination of daily, weekly and annual handling and welfare audits conducted by animal welfare specialists.'* Hormel Foods reported that it conducted daily internal audits, carried out by quality assurance and operations staff at its turkey processing facilities, and Sysco reported that its egg suppliers undergo annual animal welfare audits.

Finally, several companies reported on their achievements in enhancing animal welfare and some of them reported on the key performance indicators they employed to measure animal welfare. Tyson Foods, for example, reported that its *'Key Welfare Indicators'* were *'outcome-based and are valuable metrics because they measure how different aspects of a living environment impact an animal'* and that *'we've chosen specific indicators to focus on that can be measured consistently across our operations'*, *and 'we monitor progress by reviewing them throughout the year and reporting annually.'* Further, under the banner *'2019 Key Achievements',* Tyson Foods, reported on the construction of a new commercial broiler research farm, the number of employees who had successfully completed its poultry handling and transport certification programme, and the implementation of welfare audits in its cattle supply chain.

Smithfield Foods reported *'we enhanced our animal care procedures in 2019 with the consolidation of best practices from across our U.S. regions into a single manual of standard*

operating procedures and training, which we are implementing in 2020' Smithfield Foods also reported that it had *'aligned our in-farm auditing processes under the purview of our animal handling specialists, with the aim of improving the consistency of our animal care policies and procedures across our operations'* and that *'these efforts build on the work we have underway in antibiotic use, housing and nutrition.'* More specifically, Smithfield Foods reported enhancing its transport related animal handling procedures to reduce off load waiting times for animals. JBS reported that 98-100% scores were achieved on external animal welfare audits and 100% of employees who had contact with animals were trained according to the company's animal welfare programmes. In summarising its animal welfare achievements, Perdue Farms reported that 45% of poultry houses have windows and 13% have outdoor access and that 100% of farmers and employees handling live animals had received welfare training.

Reflections

Most of the top ten meat and poultry producing companies in the US addressed the issue of animal welfare in their most recent sustainability report. As such, this is somewhat at odds with the claim by Sullivan et al. (2017) that many of the major food companies *'have yet to acknowledge farm animal welfare as a business issue or to demonstrate their approach to farm animal welfare to stakeholders and society.'* That said, the leading US meat and poultry producing companies were at their most emphatic in emphasising their strategic commitment to animal welfare, but some of these claimed commitments might currently be best seen as aspirational. In addressing achievements, some of the companies reported on successfully meeting a number of their animal care targets but were less fulsome in reporting on how some strategic commitments were being pursued, and in providing any detailed material to explicitly evidence their animal welfare achievements.

At the same time, while the leading meat and poultry producing companies in the US certainly affirmed their commitment to animal welfare in their sustainability reports, these commitments are contested by a range of animal welfare organisations and pressure groups. The American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (2020), for example, claimed that the *'majority of the nearly 10 billion land-based animals, plus countless more aquatic animals, farmed for food each year in the US live in unacceptable conditions.'* More specifically, the American Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals (2020), listed the major sources of animal suffering on intensive factory farms, including indoor confinement with poor air quality and unnatural light, reliance on antibiotics to compensate for stressful and unsanitary conditions, abusive handling by workers often due to poor training or poorly designed facilities, and overcrowding.

Under the banner *'Improving the Lives of Farm Animals'*, The Humane Society of the United States (2020) claimed *'on factory farms, egg-laying hens are packed into cages where they can't even spread their wings. Baby calves are taken from their mothers and confined in crates so small they can barely move. Mother pigs are locked in crates nearly the width and length of their bodies, unable to even turn around.'* The Human Society of the United States (2020) also took a wider view and argued *'factory farming causes billions of animals to*

suffer every year, but they are not the only ones paying a heavy price. Animal agriculture accounts for a large percentage of the greenhouse gases associated with climate change. Waste from factory farms also makes its way into the air and water supply, poisoning rural communities.'.

The leading meat and poultry producing companies in the US vigorously refute such claims but the evidencing of their achievements on animal welfare is a thorny issue. The employment of cameo case studies and stories about animal welfare within sustainability reports might be seen to add a sense of reality to the reporting process by depicting the experiences of those involved in corporate animal welfare programmes. However, there are issues surrounding the relationship between the general and the particular, not least in that case studies and stories have been selected and choreographed by the companies to reflect corporate goals, and while they may have an emotive appeal, they cannot be taken to be representative of a company's approach to animal welfare. More substantively, many large companies across the business world look to use quantitative key performance indicators to measure their achievements against their sustainable development targets and then to commission independent external assurance to verify their performance. Few of the leading US meat and poultry producing companies reported on devising and employing detailed performance indicators, and external assurance was, all too often, conspicuous by its absence from their sustainability reports. This, in turn, can be seen to reduce the integrity and the credibility of the reporting process and as such, might be seen to undermine the leading meat and poultry producing companies' commitments to animal welfare.

More widely, Haggerty et al. (2009) argued that under neoliberalism the role of the state in agricultural governance had declined and been replaced by consumer and industry driven regulation on animal welfare. Here, the argument is that audit-based governance is effectively shaped by the food industry itself, and that *'grocery marketers translate consumer preferences into checklists of acceptable farming practices in negotiation with farming sector lobbies, consumer groups and other participants in agri-food systems'* (Haggarty 2009). In reviewing the role of *'audit in animal welfare',* Escobar and Demeritt (2016*)* highlighted the general *'tendency for audit processes both to become decoupled from the qualities they are meant to assure.'* As such, there is the danger that the audit exercises which are reported as a major feature of corporate commitment to animal welfare in the US meat and poultry industry, become a routine reporting end in themselves, rather than a means to an end.

Conclusion

While most of the leading meat and poultry producing companies in the US reported on their strategic commitment to animal welfare, there are issues surrounding the evidencing of this commitment within their sustainability reports. These issues revolve around the lack independent external assurance of the material on animal welfare within these reports and around concerns that the companies audit processes may become exercises which are effectively decoupled from the process of ensuring animal welfare, and from animal welfare regulation. More generally, while it remains to be seen if, and how, the

US meat and poultry industry will look to tackle issues of external assurance and regulation, their current approach to animal welfare seems likely to remain a contested public issue for some time to come.

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SUSTAINABILTY REPORT WEBSITES

JBS https://sustainability.jbssa.com/

Tyson Foods https://www.tysonfoods.com/sustainability/annual-sustainability-report

Sysco https://www.tysonfoods.com/sustainability/annual-sustainability-report

Smithfield Foods https://www.smithfieldfoods.com/sustainability

Hormel Foods https://csr.hormelfoods.com/

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OSI https://www.osigroup.com/wp-content/uploads/OSI-2018-2019-Global-Sustainability-Report-web.pdf

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