WELFARE QUALITY® PROTOCOL ON ANIMAL WELFARE: APPLICABILITY TO EXTENSIVE BEEF SYSTEMS

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ANIMAL WELFARE (AW) is a complex issue and its assessment integrates many different aspects. The European Welfare Quality® (WQ) project has developed a system to evaluate the quality of AW in different species, including bovines. The methodology was applied successfully in intensive production systems. Uruguay together with 3 Latin American (LA) countries belongs to the INCO project, an extension of WQ®. The objective of this work was to assess the applicability of WQ® methodology in extensive beef cattle farms. During 2008, 6 Uruguayan farms with an average size of 1553 hectares (250-7000) and an average herd size of 1270 animals (175-4500) were visited by two trained observers. All farms had different categories of European beef-producing breeds (Hereford, Angus and its crosses) for the complete cycle on natural pastures. According to WQ® protocols the following animal-based measures were performed:

Social Behavior (SB), observing antagonistic and cohesive behaviour; Quality Behaviour Assessment (QBA), observing animals and scoring with a special terminology; Avoidance Distance (AD), the distance an animal moves away from humans; and Clinical Score (CD) assesses physical health factors. This protocol also includes environmental measures. Some problems with the protocol's applicability were found, arising mainly from farm and herd size. The visualization for individual identification was difficult. Regarding SB, no antagonistic behavior was observed in animals kept on large pastures. AD found in animals grazing free was 34 meters on average (15-40). CS: no records at all of: hairless patches, number of lesions/swellings, overgrown claws, too dirty animals, ocular discharge and increased respiratory rate were found in 6 farms and 400 animals observed. In extensive systems, it is unusual to see dirty animals. One farm had animals with nasal discharge and two farms, animals with diarrhoea. In 4 farms, a total of 121 very thin animals were found. The protocols’ applicability was also affected by the time required, as well as the structure of the farms (big size of the pens). We conclude that more studies are needed to adjust the protocol for extensive production systems and it should include new factors such as: heat stress, risk of predation, horn flies, screwworm, pasture size, mineral supplements, water supply from natural sources, shade, mounting, branding (compulsory in some countries and very common in others) and level of human-animal interactions.