

Inspector@work: Mezzogiorno, Italy



I am a veterinary surgeon with ten years of academic experience in animal husbandry. I have a Ph.D., five postdoctoral fellowships, and a specialisation in animal nutrition. Since 2013, I have worked at the Istituto Zooprofilattico Serimentale del Mezzogiorno. We support official veterinarians in decisions on Animal Welfare and Biosecurity, focusing on the actual conditions with respect to current legislation and its correct interpretation to meet the needs of animals. Most of my activities are carried out in collaboration with official veterinarians conducting inspections on Bovine and Buffalo farms in our region.

The role is about finding balance. We want to create sustainability and avoid public health risks, with as little impact to the economic feasibility of each farm. This means supporting the production of the farms, while ensuring best animal welfare and minimising environmental impacts. It's not a knowledge problem, but a communication problem. The biggest challenge in my opinion is communicating risk factors to the farmers, making the balance meaningful to them.

It's not a knowledge problem, but a communication problem

It's always good to see when farms have incorporated this balance. Something as simple as feeding and managing animal groups well not only improves the animal health of each group, but also gets better economic results for the farm. And we see the difference the other way too - when these standards are not respected, it's the farmers' profits that suffer first.

Larger farms usually have good management practices, they have the structure and procedures in place. But sometimes the size of the business means there is less attention on individual animal health - and empathy is a key element of this business. On the other hand, family-run farms tend to have a much closer human-to-animal interaction. These smaller operations are invested in the animal's health, but often the structures and management conditions are suboptimal.

In my experience, the most room for welfare improvement is with animals in non-reproductive stages, such as calves, heifers and dry animals. With these stages, the short-term decision is that it is cheaper to treat a sick animal than invest in prevention practices to keep them healthy. Farmers want to see results. It's difficult to appreciate the long-term benefits of better care when margins are tight. This is where the communication balance comes in. My role is to help farmers see how good practices that don't have an obvious financial outcome - such as proper weaning for calves in their first month, or knowing how to support heifers after calving - will actually have a much bigger economic return in the long run.

In my view, the public and consumer perception of animal welfare has increased significantly in recent years, but this hasn't necessarily led to a proportional improvement in actual welfare standards on farms.

Another important aspect of this industry is how the farmers see themselves in society. There is a lot more media coverage and stories being told about livestock production systems, some of this publicity is created with an agenda, or without complete knowledge of the realities involved in the industry. Social and political decisions are influenced by these public conversations. Farmers can be unfairly accused of poor practices, and they often feel their role is misunderstood.

The welfare legislation and EU directives we are working with are over 10 years old. Farms face economic pressure towards greater intensification and automation, which means that the risks and challenges we need to look out for in animal welfare are also changing. I'd like to see our national laws updated to reflect EU standards and the current needs of farmers, animals or the wider public. There are a lot of grey areas. Standardisation of these laws would help inspectors and producers alike by having a clear, unified point of reference.

It would be nice to see regulations that look beyond just the functional space (i.e. how much floor space per animal) but also give clear directives with specific actions that need to be met. I'd like to see this of course for breeding stages, but also for non-productive stages and all the way through to transportation and slaughter stages.