

Animal welfare and legal protection of farm animals in Sweden and in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

The Czech Republic and Sweden, as member states of the European Union, are subject to the universal European regulations covering the protection and welfare of animals that must be observed in these countries. Every country may, of course, adopt its own stricter regulations over and above these EU regulations. Research on animal farming and the legislation was performed in two countries. The result was a comparison of the legislation and farm conditions. This investigation was based on the legislation and literature, our own observations, and interviews with farmers and livestock specialists.

Animal welfare, Czech Republic, legal protection of animals, livestock animals, Sweden

Introduction

The intensification of animal production took place in both the Czech Republic and Sweden in the 20th century. Animals were bred for ever-increasing production, farms became increasingly concentrated and the number of small farms declined. These changes in agriculture demanded new legislation in the area of animal protection. The first comprehensive law on animal protection in Sweden was adopted in 1945, though the need for such a law had already been discussed in the Swedish parliament a hundred years previously (Hansson 2013). There was an extremely lively discussion within society of living conditions for animals on large-scale farms in the 1980s. The writer Astrid Lindgren with the veterinary surgeon Kristina Forslund played a leading role in this social discussion and wrote articles published in the largest Swedish dailies on the lives of animals on large farms. These events led to the adoption of a new law on animal protection in 1988, which remains in force to this day.

Various government decrees banning cruelty to animals were in force in this country in the first half of the 20th century, the first of which was adopted in 1939 (Rydval 2006). Rydval (2006) calls the second half of the 20th century “the dark age in the legal protection of animals”, since the welfare and protection of farm animals in particular were at odds with Socialist agriculture, which tended to place the emphasis on continual improvement of the “performance” of livestock animals rather than their welfare. The first comprehensive animal protection law in the Czech Republic was not passed until 1992.

An overview of the legal regulations Sweden

The basic law on animal protection in Sweden is the Djurskyddslag of 1988, which has been amended many times and which is now considered inadequate in certain regards. Talks are being held on a new animal protection law. The draft of a new law was drawn up in 2011 and it now remains to be seen whether it will be passed and come into effect next year. The Djurskyddslag is accompanied by a decree on animal protection, the Djurskyddsförordning, which also came out in 1988 and which would, if a new law is

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passed, also be updated. These basic legal regulations are further supplemented by the Statens jordbruksverks föreskrifter och allmänna råd om djurhållning inom lantbruket m.m. (SJVFS 2010:15), which are detailed regulations issued in 2010 and devoted exclusively to livestock animals. Other regulations on livestock animals relate to operative surgery (SJVFS 2014:31), animal breeding (DFS 2004:22), transportation (SJVFS 2010:2) and slaughter and killing (SJVFS 2012:27).

The Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, Act No. 246/1992 Coll. on the protection of animals against cruelty of 15th April 1992 refers specifically to livestock animals in its Section Four, where it stipulates what is prohibited during livestock breeding, what are the obligations of breeders and what are the basic requirements for livestock housing and welfare. Exceptions relating to when anaesthesia is not required during operative surgery are given in Section Two of the Act.

The Decree No. 208/2004 Coll. on the minimum standards for the protection of livestock animals focuses in more detail on the welfare of livestock animals. The decree focuses on the commonest species of livestock animal bred in this country and states specific parameters for the housing of animals, such as the permitted stocking density, sizes of cages, requirements for light and sound levels in sheds, etc.

Decree No. 382/2004 Coll. on the protection of livestock animals at the time of slaughter, culling or killing and Decree No. 4/2009 Coll. on the protection of animals during transport are other legal regulations relating to livestock animals.

Regulations relating indirectly to animal protection in the area of livestock include Act No. 166/1999 Coll. on veterinary care, as amended, Act No. 154/2000 Coll. on breeding, selection and the keeping of records on livestock, and Act No. 91/1996 Coll. on animal feed, as amended.

Pig rearing

Totally, 2.7 million pigs were slaughtered in the Czech Republic, and 2.5 million pigs were slaughtered in Sweden in 2012 (Statistics: Pigs 2013). The statistical data from the Jordbruksverket, the Swedish Board of Agriculture, state an average of 40.5 pigs per shed in Sweden in 1970, rising to 702 animals per shed in 2007 (Jordbruket i siffror 1866 – 2007, 2007). Pig rearing can, then, be seen to be becoming increasingly intensive.

Piglets and fattening pigs

Gestation crates in the form in which is known in Czech Republic (i.e. an extremely small space in which the sow is fixed and a larger space around it for her piglets) are almost non-existent in Sweden. They are prohibited by the regulation SJVFS 2010:15, Chapter 3, Section 3 of which states that a gestation crate may be used only if “the sow shows signs of aggressive or otherwise disturbed behaviour that represents a large risk of injury to the piglets”. Crates that should be of a size of at least 6 m² are used, and one corner on which a heat lamp shines is partitioned off for the piglets. Otherwise, both the sow and piglets may move freely around the whole crate.

Piglets are weaned according to SJVFS 2010:15 no earlier than at the age of 4 weeks – no exceptions to this may be made. In Czech Republic, in accordance with Section 3, § 16c of the Decree on Livestock Animals, piglets may be weaned at the age of 21 days if they are “relocated to a place which is vacated, thoroughly cleaned and disinfected before the placement of a new batch, and which is separated from places in which sows are housed in order to minimise the transmission of infections to the piglets”. It is also important to mention the fact that it is usual in Sweden to move the sow rather than the piglets during weaning. Certain farms are adapted in such a way that the gestation crates are gradually

enlarged by means of the removal of partitions according to the growth of the pigs, meaning that the pigs may remain in a single crate in the same sibling group from birth to transport to the slaughterhouse.

Bedding material plays a large role in pig breeding, enabling them to engage in natural behaviour such as digging, chewing and searching. Section 3, § 9 of the Decree on Livestock Animals states that pigs “must have continual access to a sufficient amount of material that allows them to perform ethological activities, such as straw, hay, wood, sawdust, mushroom compost, peat or a mixture of such materials that pose no threat to the health of the animals”. On farms, pigs are often merely provided with a toy in the form of a chain or piece of wood. This is also manipulatable material, though it does not have the same positive effects as straw and does not allow them to engage in their natural behaviour to the same extent (Törnqvist 2013). Chapter 3, Section 7 of SJVFS 2010:15 states that “Bedding for pigs should have the kind of properties and be provided in such a quantity that make it possible for the pigs to entertain themselves and satisfy their comfort behaviour”. It goes on to add that “The bedding should be comprised of material in which the pigs can dig and search and which can be chewed by the pigs. During breeding in conventional farrowing crates, the bedding should also provide protection for the sow and piglets when lying during the first week of life of the piglets”. The problem on Swedish farms, however, is often that, although the pigs are provided with bedding, there is only a small amount of it that does not suffice to satisfy their natural needs (Törnqvist 2013).

Breeding sows

During the period immediately before and after mating, sows in the Czech Republic are generally housed in individual crates, which are often extremely narrow, do not even allow the sow to turn round, and are often without bedding material. Section 3, § 15b of the Decree on Livestock Animals states that the group housing of sows is necessary only “during the period beginning four weeks after mating and ending one week before expected birth”. Chapter 3, Section 1 of the Swedish regulation 2010:15 states that all pigs “must be housed in pairs or groups”. The only exception to this, are sows and gilts, which can be housed individually and with no view of other pigs a week prior to and during farrowing. This corresponds to the natural needs of pigs, as sows leave the herd shortly before giving birth and make a “nest” where they can give birth in safety without disturbance (Jensen 2012).

In Sweden, sows are kept in group housing for some time before and after mating, where each sow is able to “hide” from the others and stand or lie in its own pen. This pen has an automatically closable rear partition that closes when the sow is eating in its pen. Sows may be aggressive, particularly in connection with feeding (Webster 1999), for which reason it is preferable to avoid conflicts between animals by providing them with separate and closed places for feeding. Sows are often relocated to another hall between day 28 and day 108 of gestation, though the housing principle remains the same or similar. The kind of housing in which sows giving birth and nursing are kept in group housing, with each sow having its own “nest”, can also be found. This system is described by Špinka (1996) as “the most rigorous application of the principle of free group housing”.

Bedding material is extremely important to sows, particularly shortly before giving birth as sows are strongly motivated to build a nest (Jensen 2012). Section 3, § 15i of the Decree on Livestock Animals states that, “In the week before the anticipated birth, sows and gilts must receive an adequate amount of suitable bedding material if this is permitted by the system of disposal of solid and liquid manure used at the facility”. Chapter 3, Section 8 of SJVFS 2010:15 is more specific in this regard, stating that, “A week before birth, sows and gilts must have access to material allowing them to satisfy their need to build a nest. The system of manure management at facilities with conventional farrowing crates should be adapted to the use of a large amount of bedding material.”

Dairy cow breeding

The breeding of dairy cows in conventional agriculture in the Czech Republic is very different from dairy cattle breeding in Sweden. The principal and largest difference certainly lies in the breeding of dairy cattle in the summer months, with the Swedish Djurskyddsförordning decree stipulating mandatory grazing for dairy cattle. The period of grazing depends on where in Sweden a given farm is located – the grazing period is longer in the south and shorter in the north, as summer is also significantly shorter in the northern parts of the country.

The Czech Republic is a country around six times smaller than Sweden in terms of area, though according to the statistics from the Czech Ministry of Agriculture and the Jordbruksverket (the Swedish Board of Agriculture) around the same number of dairy cattle are reared in the two countries (338 000 dairy cattle in Sweden in 2015 and 368 000 dairy cattle in this country in the same year, though the average number of dairy cows on one farm in Sweden is 84, while the corresponding figure in this country is 305 dairy cattle).

Few differences can be found between the two countries in terms of the various equipment and systems used in sheds and milking sheds and during milking. Various kinds of lying boxes, various floor materials and kinds of beddings may differ on each farm, and the Swedish legislation does not impose any stricter measures in these areas over and above the EU legislation. The one large difference in the legislation, apart from the grazing mentioned above, can be found in relation to the dehorning of calves. In Sweden, calves may not be dehorned without the use of anaesthetic under any circumstances, while this procedure may be performed in Czech Republic without anaesthetic up to the age of 4 weeks.

Grazing

It is not customary in the Czech Republic for dairy cattle in large-capacity cowsheds to go out to pasture every day. Reasons for this may be a certain shortage of land and pasture, the associated complications to cowshed operations, and the substantiated or unsubstantiated fear that the cows would produce less milk. This could be caused either by the cow spending the whole day outside and expending energy in moving and grazing, or by the grazed grass itself not providing the cows with such a large amount of essential nutrients as their concentrated feed. What's more, the cows would probably not consume as much grass as they would consume concentrated feed in the shed. If, however, we take a look at the statistics, we see that the average yearly milk yield was 8 001 kg of milk per cow in the Czech Republic in 2015 (Kvapilík, Růžička and Bucek 2016), while the statistics from the Swedish Board of Agriculture indicate an average milk yield of 8 768 kg per cow per year. These numbers are extremely similar, even a little higher in Sweden where every dairy cow grazes in the summer.

The Swedish Decree on the protection of animals (the Djurskyddsförordning) states that cows for milk production older than six months should have access to pasture in the summer months. Cows should spend at least six hours a day on the pasture. In the southern parts of Sweden, cows should be on the pasture for at least four months, with a maximum of five cows per hectare. In central Sweden, cows are to graze for at least three months, with a maximum of six cows per hectare of pasture. In northern parts of Sweden, the compulsory period of grazing is shortened to two months, with a maximum of seven cows per hectare.

On many Swedish farms rearing dairy cattle, the first time the cows are put out to pasture in the spring is a public event, and it could be said to be a certain advertising move – owners support the public in the purchase of Swedish milk as they hide nothing from the public, show them their farms and cows running out onto the pasture which they quickly begin to graze. This image certainly gives people the feeling that these are the “laughing cows”.

Rearing chickens for eggs Rearing laying hens in cages

There has been interesting development in the rearing of laying hens in cages in Sweden. This method of rearing began to spread rapidly in the 1960s, before cages for laying hens were banned by law in the 1980s. Intensive animal farming came in for severe criticism at that time and the debate on changing conditions for animals resulted in a new animal protection law in 1988. The greatest changes produced by the new law were seen for laying hens with the prohibition of cage rearing. Farmers then had ten years to implement the conversion of their technological systems. This, however, proved unfeasible for many farmers, for which reason cages were again permitted by an amendment to the law, though these cages had to be upgraded. All farmers had to have modernised their systems definitively by 2004.

Regarding EU legislation, it has not been possible to build new cage systems in the Czech Republic since 2003, and all existing cages had to be converted to improved cages by 2012. These improved cages should provide hens with a minimum of 750 cm² (of which 600 cm² of usable area), a perch, a nest and litter for rooting and dust baths.

Statistical data from 2015 states that only 21% of all laying hens were reared in cages in Sweden in that year. The figure for 2013 was 24%. Demand for battery eggs is continually falling, and large retail chains such as Lidl, Coop and Willys have responded to this and do not offer battery eggs at all in their stores in Sweden. Statistical data from 2013 show, that 84% of all laying hens in the Czech Republic were reared in cages.

Rearing laying hens in halls

Eggs labelled “hall eggs” or “litter-laid eggs” in the Czech Republic are eggs from rearing halls where the hens may or may not be provided with litter. In Sweden, is generally seen the words “från frigående höns inomhus” on the box, which literally means “from free-range hens indoors”. This is the most widespread rearing method in Sweden, with 63% of laying hens kept in this way in 2013. The figure for the Czech Republic is just 16% of laying hens. The Czech Decree on animal protection states that the stocking density may be a maximum of 9 hens per 1 m² of useable area. In Sweden, the same is true in the case of single-storey halls. In multi-level halls, the stocking density may not exceed 7 hens per 1 m² of useable area or 20 hens to 1 m² of floor area.

Other rearing systems

Two ways of rearing laying hens, if we do not include small-scale rearing, are possible. These are organic farming and free-range farming.

On free-range farms, the hens can go out. Free-range farming is extremely similar to organic farming, though the parameters of housing and feeding need not meet the strict conditions of organic farming.

Only 1% of laying hens in this country are reared on organic farms, while the figure for Sweden is 12%. Free-range farming is even less widespread in the Czech Republic, accounting for less than 1% of laying hens (just 11 000 hens). It is not a particularly widespread method of farming in Sweden either, with 55 000 hens reared in this way which amounts to around 1%. Such a low level of use of free-range housing could be put down to the fact that farmers with the appropriate conditions for keeping hens outside would rather run their farms in accordance with the demands of organic farming and thereby obtain the symbol of organic farming and be able to sell their eggs at a higher price.

Conclusions

A comparison of the animal protection legislation in the Czech Republic and Sweden shows that Sweden outperforms Czech Republic in much respect. Although the two countries

cannot be compared directly in view of their geographic and climactic conditions, it would be appropriate to take at least some inspiration from the kind of animal protection applied in Sweden. Animal protection and the assurance of the welfare of livestock animals in the two countries are guided by the same European regulations, though their non-observance is a frequent problem, reflected in the Czech Republic, for example the unsuitable use of “manipulable material” on pig farms. The same problem is also encountered in Sweden, where savings are made on bedding for pigs which often leads to the bedding provided failing to fulfil its purpose as there is not enough of it to provide the pigs with the opportunity of displaying their natural behaviour.

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