

Proceedings  
of the  
14<sup>th</sup> IFOAM Organic World Congress  
“Cultivating Communities”

21-24 August 2002  
Victoria Conference Centre  
Canada

Compiled by Robert Thompson



published by:  
**Canadian Organic Growers (COG)**  
Box 6408, Stn. J  
Ottawa K2A 3Y6  
[www.cog.ca](http://www.cog.ca)

Compiled by: Robert Thompson (Kathleen Gibson, editorial assistant)  
Cover design: Weatherby Design  
Printed by: Queens Printers  
With financial support from Agriculture and Agri-food Canada

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ISBN 0-9695851-5-2

## **Animal Health and Welfare in Organic Livestock Production: Conclusions and Recommendations of a Networking Project**

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Keywords: animal health, animal welfare, livestock production, research, networking

### **Introduction**

The basic objectives of the International Federation of Organic Farming Movements (IFOAM) consist of 17 standards (IFOAM, 2000). Only three of these standards refer to organic livestock production: maintenance of biodiversity, freedom and access to natural behaviour to livestock and promotion of a balanced mix of crop and livestock production, leading to closed and sustainable nutrient cycles. These principles contain no explicit objectives to maintain or promote high animal health or welfare standards. Consumers, however, equate organic livestock production with high welfare standards (refs) and the European Commission Regulation 1804/99 (CEC, 1999), governing organic livestock production in the Community area contains strong implicit standards that appear to be designed to enhance both health and welfare of organically managed stock. Recently, questions have been raised in regard to the ability of the organic production methods to support good animal welfare and health status in livestock (refs). The conclusions of a networking project in Europe go some way in responding to those questions.

### **Description of project**

The network for Animal Health and Welfare in Organic Agriculture (NAHWOA) was a three-year networking project (1999-2001), funded by the European Union Council to create a forum for institutions working in the field of organic animal health and welfare research and to support the development of organic livestock production standards in Europe. The project involved 17 institutes from 13 different EU countries. The project outcomes and further details on the partnership are available from the project web-site ([www.veeru.reading.ac.uk/organic](http://www.veeru.reading.ac.uk/organic)).

### **Conclusions**

The following conclusions and recommendations were made in the five workshops that were organised during the project:

It is important to formulate a philosophical definition and basis for animal welfare in organic farming and to seek to solve potential conflicts between animal welfare and other organic farming aims.

Whilst the development of organic standards should be driven and informed by research that reflects the practice and experience of organic farmers, there is also a need to guarantee that policy makers seek advice from ethologists/other animal welfare experts and from public health and veterinary experts when developing the standards.

Animal health is considered a vital part of animal welfare. It is therefore, of concern, that a growing body of evidence suggests that animal health situation on organic farms is no better than that reported in conventional livestock production systems.

Animal health management on organic farms should be based on evidence-based and on-going planning that should preferably be produced in written format and should be able to demonstrate a gradual improvement of health and welfare status and decreasing reliance on medicinal therapy and prophylaxis.

The central feature of EU Regulation 1804/1999, requiring selection of appropriate breeds and strains for particular farm or conditions, should be given more weight in the development of organic livestock systems.

There is a need to develop organic livestock production systems that are fully integrated with other production systems on the farm and that are focused on providing livestock access to natural behaviour as part of the system.

### **Acknowledgements**

The contributions of all project partners and workshop delegates in producing the conclusion and recommendations are acknowledged. The EU Council funded this work.

## Animal Health and Welfare in Organic Systems: Can it be Taken for Granted?

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Key words: organic animal husbandry, organic livestock production, animal welfare, animal health

Animal welfare has always been important in organic farming (Niggli and Lockeretz, 1996). IFOAM states that a principle aim for organic farming is "to give all livestock conditions of life with due consideration for the basic aspects of their innate behaviour" (IFOAM, 2000, p. 1). As a general principle for animal husbandry it is further stated "that all management techniques, including those where production levels and speed of growth are concerned, should be directed to the good health and welfare of the animals" (IFOAM, 2000, 5:1). In several countries animal welfare has also become a marketing argument for organic animal products. For example, Swedish and Danish consumers believe organic livestock experience better welfare than animals in conventional farming (Holmberg, 2000; the Danish Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries, 1999).

The question we must ask is: How successful have the organic movement and organic farmers been in implementing the general principle above and meeting consumer expectations? It is quite clear that although the IFOAM Basic Standards are concerned with animal welfare, their main emphasis is on environmental issues and ecological sustainability (Lund and Röcklinsberg, 2001).

This is not an easy question to answer. Not much research has been performed in the area of organic animal health and welfare. Further more, one must be cautious when comparing research results from different countries and time periods, due to differences in organic standards and how these are applied by different certification bodies. Also, organic livestock production techniques are rapidly developing and changing. A recent literature review found only 23 peer-reviewed articles dealing with health and welfare in organic herds. These articles were mainly dealing with parasitology and dairy cattle health. However difficult to draw general conclusions, there still seem to be some reasons for optimism. None of these papers found indications that health and welfare are worse in organic than in conventional livestock farming, with the exception of parasite-related diseases. On the contrary, some recent studies showed that organic livestock had better health compared to conventional livestock, again with the exception for parasitic diseases. - One may note that none of the above papers focus on welfare issues other than health. For example, in spite of IFOAM's focus on the animals' "innate behaviour" no ethological studies have been published to evaluate how well this aim is fulfilled.

When animal welfare issues in organic farming are discussed, the dilemmas inherent in the organic standards (arising from that these have to serve many different interests) must be considered (Lund and Röcklinsberg, 2001). Also another crucial question must be asked: Does "animal welfare" mean the same thing in organic and conventional farming? The issue has been raised lately (Alrøe et al., 2001; Lund and Röcklinsberg, 2001) and this important discussion must continue. Probably the animal's possibility to perform its species-specific behavior should be assigned greater importance in organic farming, and perhaps is a systemic approach to the issue more relevant. Finally: We must make sure that animal welfare remains an important issue in organic farming.

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