

Reports and Comments

New UK Code of Practice for housing and care in science

The Animals in Science Regulation Unit (ASRU) of the UK Home Office, the body responsible for the regulation of animal use for scientific research and testing in the UK has recently issued a new Code of Practice for the Housing and Care of Animals Bred, Supplied or Used for Scientific Purposes. The document is designed to accompany the legislation that governs the use of protected animals for scientific research and testing in the UK — the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act, 1986 (ASPA). ASPA has recently been amended following the UK's transposition of the European Directive (2010/63) and the new Code of Practice (CoP) reflects recent changes to ASPA as well as some upcoming changes.

The CoP is divided into three sections — the first section outlines the mandatory minimum standards for the care and accommodation of protected animals in the UK, whilst the second outlines standards which will come into force in 2017, including new standards for a number of species which were not covered in Section 1, such as amphibians and reptiles. Sections 1 and 2 are comprised predominantly of a series of engineering standards which specify the minimum standards for housing and environmental conditions (such as cage sizes and temperatures) for various species.

Section 3 is perhaps the most interesting as it goes beyond the legal minimum standards to provide advice on how animals should be cared for. Unlike the first two sections, this chapter adopts a mixture of engineering and performance standards, acknowledging that environmental conditions for animals may be judged to be inappropriate by inadequate performance or welfare outcomes, such as decreased breeding performance or undesirable behaviours, such as aggression. Since the role of ASRU is primarily to ensure that legal minimum standards are complied with, the inclusion of this section represents an interesting development and shows a commitment to raising standards of animal care in UK science above and beyond the minimums specified by legislation.

The advice in Section 3 takes into account recent research findings and Section 3 also includes encouragement to establishments to continually review and improve standards of care and to adopt 3Rs' principles. It is also acknowledged that Section 3 is likely to be revised or amended as new knowledge and refinement techniques emerge. Finally, at the end of the document, it is pleasing to see the inclusion of a bibliography and links to web resources, which along with encouragement for those caring for laboratory animals, and especially ethical review bodies and 'named persons' (those with statutory responsibility for animal care) to keep abreast of the latest findings to ensure that they maintain the highest welfare standards based not only on the CoP but the wider scientific literature.

As well as being an essential item on the library shelves of all institutions caring for laboratory animals in the UK, the CoP may prove useful elsewhere where less-detailed information is available.

Code of Practice for the Housing and Care of Animals Bred, Supplied or Used for Scientific Purposes (December 2014). A4, 227 pages. Home Office, UK. Available for download from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/388895/COPAnimalsFullPrint.pdf.

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EFSA publishes Scientific Opinion on sheep welfare

Following a request from the European Commission, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) Panel have published a Scientific Opinion on the welfare risks related to the farming of sheep taking into account differences in genetic lines, local production systems, environmental conditions and nutrition.

The Opinion considers sheep farmed for three different production purposes (wool, meat and milk) and focuses on ewes and lambs. There are a number of ways in which sheep may be managed, and the AHAW Panel categorised management systems as: shepherding, intensive, semi-intensive, semi-extensive, extensive, very extensive and mixed. Characterisation was based on: degree of human contact; use of housing; quality, availability and management of pasture; and provision of supplementary feeding.

Seventeen animal welfare consequences and associated risk factors were generated by the Working Group based on the following four principles: good feeding; good housing and environment; good health; and appropriate behaviour (as identified in the Welfare Quality project®). Welfare consequences are considered by EFSA AHAW to be "changes in any welfare aspect that result from the effect of a factor or factors, defined as any aspect of the environment in relation to housing and management".

Across all systems the following welfare consequences were rated as most important in ewes: thermal stress, lameness and mastitis. In lambs, the most important welfare consequences were found to be: thermal stress, pain due to management procedures, gastro-enteric disorders, and neonatal disorders.

Validated animal-based measures (ABMs) were also identified which may be used to evaluate the welfare consequences. In ewes, suitable ABMs were found to be: body condition score, locomotion score, udder consistency and somatic cell count in milk, and for lambs: shivering, evidence of painful husbandry procedures and dag score.

The Opinion closes with 17 Conclusions and 11 Recommendations. Recommendations include: "Further