Actions for the implementation of OIE animal welfare standards during transport, at slaughter and in livestock production systems in Chile

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Since 1998 research projects regarding long distance transport of cattle and sheep and its effects on animal welfare (AW) have been undertaken at Universidad Austral de Chile (UACh), mainly financed by FONDECYT/Chile. Between 2005 and 2010 a diagnosis of AW conditions at slaughter, considering the OIE guidelines as a basis, was carried out financed by the Ministry of Agriculture (FIA/Chile), UACh and the private sector through the main export slaughterhouses. Since 2009 further studies financed by FONDECYVT focused in AW problems in industrial dairy production systems including the relationship between lameness, behaviour and milk yield of cows, management of pain during handling procedures on farm, and the relationship between behaviour and reproductive parameters. These studies have been key to drive the implementation of OIE AW standards, and the strategy used has focused on enhancing the economic impact of interventions for improving AW, like training of human resources and infrastructure adequations, on animal product quantity and quality, as well as access to higher price markets.

An Animal Protection Law was passed in 2009 in Chile, and since 2013 three regulations -framed within OIE standards- cover AW in industrial livestock production systems, commercialization, transport and slaughter. The existence of competent animal handlers at each level has been made compulsory; they need to approve official courses given by institutions recognized by the Agricultural and Livestock Service (SAG). The OIE Animal Welfare Collaborating Centre (AWCC) created in 2009, was the first institution recognized by SAG to deliver those courses and has so far officially trained over 560 people, including veterinarian inspectors, farmers, animal handlers, truck drivers and slaughterhouse staff.

Notwithstanding that Chilean consumers are still more concerned about food safety and a fair price for animal products than about maintaining AW standards, meat exportation has provided a good opportunity to implement OIE AW standards in the industry. Due to the socio-economic, cultural and educational situation of a high number of small farmers and backyard animal breeders, improving animal welfare at this level is a pending challenge. In conclusion research results and the AWCC have contributed to implement OIE AW standards in Chile, highlighting: 1) provision of scientific evidences to elaborate national regulations; 2) transference of new knowledge to under and postgraduate students at national and international level; 3) inclusion of compulsory AW courses in the veterinary curriculum; 4) increase in the number of publications on AW in scientific journals; 5) participation in bioethical committees for the use of animals in research and education; 6) capacity building of stakeholders.

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