SHEEP FARMERS' PERCEPTION OF SHEEP WELFARE IN SOUTHERN BRAZIL: PRELIMINARY RESULTS

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The aim of this study was to describe the perception of sheep farmers regarding sheep welfare, through a survey in Southern Brazil. Fifty-nine farmers answered a questionnaire either online or on paper, from September to November 2017. There were three open and three multiple-choice questions. Some questions were not answered by all farmers since respondents could choose to skip part of the questionnaire or quit participation at any point. Most respondents considered sheep and beef cattle systems (63%, 22/35) as the best in terms of animal welfare, followed by dairy cattle (29%, 10/35). When asked what are the conditions in their farms which improve sheep welfare, 71% (42/59) answered that sheep had free access to pasture and 69% (41/59) free access to a source of water, followed by calm management (54%, 32/59), access to shadow (51%, 30/59), experienced shepherd (47%, 28/59), good forage quality and quantity (46%, 27/59) and immediate veterinary care (32%, 19/59). Concerning on-farm welfare challenges, 40% (23/59) mentioned untrained dogs stressing sheep during handling, lamb mortality (36%, 21/59), inexperienced shepherds (32%, 19/59), forage scarcity at certain times of the year (25%, 15/59) and the absence of shadow (14%, 8/59). The top answer regarding welfare problems which farmers feel no autonomy to solve was the low value attributed to sheep meat chain (43%, 18/42), followed by predation (26%, 11/42) and stolen animals (14%, 6/42). As for suggestions and demands to improve sheep welfare, 35% (6/17) cited the need of support for the meat chain and profit from animal welfare as a value, 35% (6/17) requested help to mitigate predation and robbery problems and 29% (5/17) asked for more information and training regarding sheep welfare. In relation to animal abuse, answers listed first physical aggression (56%, 19/34) followed by not feeding the animals (32%, 11/34). Other answers were associated to fear (18%, 6/34), health problems (18%, 6/34), stress and suffering (12%, 4/34), animal isolation (9%, 3/34), thirst (9%, 3/34), low animal welfare (6%, 2/34), pain and injury (6%, 2/34), thermic stress by cold (3%, 1/34), restriction to natural behaviour (3%, 1/34) and killing the animal (3%, 1/34). Thus, farmers presented an interesting perception of animal welfare aspects of their activities and expressed relevant requests, mostly regarding more information on sheep welfare and the need for the attribution of higher value to sheep production.

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