

Animal housing structure and animal welfare

Problem: For sheep, in Italy, there is no specific law that regulates welfare, but we comply with the Legislative Decree of 26 March 2001 n.146 "implementation of directive 98/58 / EC relating to the protection of farm animals". This Decree sets out the guidelines to be followed which are based on the "5 freedoms". They represent five essential principles for respecting a good physical and mental state of the animal which are identified in: freedom from hunger, thirst and malnutrition, freedom to live in an adequate physical environment, freedom from pain, injury and disease, freedom of manifest its behavioral characteristics and freedom from fear and discomfort. An animal that is well is able to express itself according to its maximum productive, quantitative and qualitative capacity possible. A fundamental starting point for obtaining this result is to ensure the adequacy of the breeding facilities.

Solutions: In general, the housing structures, the litter, the materials used for the construction of the boxes and the equipment with which the animals come into contact, must not be harmful to them. In addition, you should always check that there are no obstacles, sharp edges or protrusions that could cause injury, abscess, or lameness. Except for specific sanitary reasons, the animals must not be tied up, but must have the possibility to move freely and to manifest their own species-specific behaviors. The available space must therefore allow all animals to lie down at the same time, rest and stand up normally, turn around and walk freely. Animals must always have access to food and drinking water which must be guaranteed healthy and clean. Housing facilities should also be able to ensure the thermal comfort of the animals by controlling temperature and humidity. Finally, the milking parlor must also be suitable in terms of its structure and functioning.

Practical recommendations:

- separate the resting area from the feeding area, to allow the animal to choose where and how to move, also avoiding the food and drinking water from getting dirty;
- ensure minimum covered areas for housing for the various age categories of the animals; for sheep in production between 1.5 and 1.7 m² / head, replacement lambs over 3 months between 1.0 - 1.2 m² / head, replacement lambs under 3 months between 0.3 - 0.5 m² / head and finally rams > 3.5 m² / head if housed in a single pen and > 2.2 m² / head if in a collective pen
- do not subject animals to artificial light for more than 16 hours a day
- renew the litter regularly using suitable and safe materials for the animals;
- evaluate the fattening status of the animals; the optimum is between 2.50 and 3.25 depending on the physiological stage;
- the use of pastures proves to be an excellent choice to promote the well-being of the animal, but there must always be a source of water, whether natural or artificial, clean and always available. And the possibility of sheltering in the event of bad weather must be guaranteed by using natural or artificial shelters;
- the management of the herd by the operators is of fundamental importance for the subject dealt with; the relationship must be based on routine aspects and be conducted in such a way as not to create fear or discomfort in animals, using non-violent methods and ways.

