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Finnish farmers' perceptions of the roles of farmers, authorities and industry in farm animal welfare and of subsidy development

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Farmers' perceptions of animal welfare policies are topical issues in the development of agricultural policy. Thematic analysis of twelve Finnish cattle and sheep farmers' semi-structured interviews identified their perceptions of the roles of farmers, authorities, and industries in supporting animal welfare. The participating farmers perceived that the role of farmers' included responsibility for farm conditions and farmers' own welfare. Industry partners were identified as important actors in animal welfare and played a role in farm business economies and quality systems. Authorities' roles were perceived to include providing financial support through subsidies and supervising compliance with regulations. Investment subsidies were considered effective in supporting animal welfare, whereas welfare payment was often seen as having limited additional impact. Farmers perceived the competence of both farmers and authorities as important for the successful implementation of animal welfare regulations. Steady income, reduced administrative burden, and clear rules co-created with farmers that support the goal of improving animal welfare emerged as subsidy development proposals. The findings highlight that improving animal welfare requires a policy approach in which subsidy design, regulatory practices, and administrative processes are evaluated through animal welfare impact assessment and aligned with farmers' economic and practical realities.

KEYWORDS

animal welfare governance, common agricultural policy (CAP), controls, European Union, policy instruments, thematic analysis

1 Introduction

To advance animal welfare, it is important to understand how farmers perceive animal welfare controls and how subsidy schemes impact on their practices. Farmers' perspectives also provide valuable insights into the future development needs of support schemes. Approaches to supporting animal welfare vary globally (Sørensen and Fraser, 2010). This study was conducted in Finland, a Member State of the European Union (EU), and thus reflects the European approach, in which the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) recognizes animals as sentient beings and obligates Member States to pay full regard to animal welfare when formulating and implementing agricultural policies (Article 13, TFEU). In the EU, animal welfare is addressed by regulating the resources available to animals, such as space, care, quantity and quality of food and drink, structural and environmental

requirements of the establishment (Sowery, 2018), and supporting actions through various subsidy instruments (Bonafos et al., 2010). Animal welfare governance is typically characterized by the involvement of both public and private actors, although their respective roles vary across countries (European Commission, 2016; Buller et al., 2018; Veissier et al., 2008).

The concept of animal welfare refers to an animal's experience of its psychological and physical well-being, which can vary from good to poor (Broom, 2020). In the EU, the assessment of animal welfare is increasingly approached through the Five Domains (nutrition, physical environment, health, behavioral interactions, and mental state), which aim to describe the various dimensions of animal welfare by focusing on both the absence of negative experiences and the presence of positive experiences for the animal (Mellor et al., 2020; European Commission, 2022). European citizens consider animal welfare an important aspect of sustainable farming (Broom, 2020). In 2016, 94% (European Commission, 2016) and in 2023, 91% (European Commission, 2023) of respondents to Eurobarometer surveys stated that it is important to protect farm animal welfare.

Farmers are on the front line when it comes to animal welfare and its improvement (Kauppinen et al., 2010). Ensuring animal welfare requires active work and sufficient resources from animal keepers. Farmers' activities are guided by legislation and support policies, as well as by markets and societal expectations. To care for animals, farmers need sufficient physiological and psychological abilities, knowledge, and skills, as well as sufficient income. Revenue from farming comes from the market; however, especially for dairy, beef, and lamb production, the role of farm subsidies is considerable in the EU (Adams et al., 2025). Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies consist of several fiscal instruments depending on the animal species, form of production, and region (European Commission, 2022). Farm subsidies are based on conditionality, in which receiving subsidies is conditional on meeting minimum requirements set out in EU legislation.

Biocircularity aims to ensure the sustainable use of biological resources while maintaining ecological, social, and economic sustainability (Holden et al., 2023). Animal welfare, its promotion, and its monitoring are integral components of this broader sustainability framework (Puupponen et al., 2023). Voluntary subsidy schemes can support a higher level of welfare than that required by law and compensate for the increased production costs incurred by investing in animal welfare (Grethe et al., 2018; Bergschmidt et al., 2021; Guyomard et al., 2021). However, the effectiveness of these measures depends not only on their regulatory design but also on how farmers perceive their fairness, clarity, and administrative feasibility.

Farmers' experiences with animal welfare monitoring have been studied previously in EU; for example, in Denmark by Anneberg et al. (2012), in Finland by Väärikkälä et al. (2018), in France by Veissier et al. (2021), and in Sweden by Lundmark Hedman et al. (2022). Controls for animal-related agricultural subsidies have been studied less than animal welfare inspections. In this study, the focus was also on the supervision and development of animal welfare-related subsidies, and the aim was to fill the research gap by widening the perspective from the supervision of animal welfare to animal-related subsidies. The effectiveness of subsidies on animal welfare has not been studied extensively, mainly because of the lack of common

indicators (European Court of Auditors, 2018). Furthermore, study designs using quantitative research would require studying animal welfare before and after intervention, which is not easily achieved.

This study's perspective arises from the empirical research tradition of public law as the study addresses the supervision and effectiveness of farm subsidies on animal welfare using a qualitative approach. Farmer perceptions were examined using a thematic analysis. This study addresses the following research questions 1) What are the roles of farmers, authorities, and industry operators in supporting animal welfare? 2) How can the support system be developed to better support animal welfare?

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Study design

This qualitative study was guided by the general inductive approach described by Thomas (2006), which provides a systematic procedure for deriving findings from data in relation to focused evaluation questions. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the data collection method, as they are well suited to exploring complex and sensitive issues and capturing diverse perspectives (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview themes covered (i) farm subsidies affecting animal welfare, (ii) sources of information on requirements, (iii) animal welfare controls and controls for animal-related subsidies, (iv) administrative procedures for supervision, (v) the role of the industry, and (vi) development proposals.

Animal welfare and related subsidies form a complex matrix (Jacques, 2014). Qualitative methods can be useful for studying such complexity, and they can uncover individuals' experiences and the insights underlying their views (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Thematic analysis is appropriate for examining participants' experiences within a specific context and for identifying their perspectives and concerns (Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and was therefore selected as the method of analysis.

2.2 Participants

Participants were recruited through advertisements in the Finnish Food Authority's farmer newsletter and Facebook. The recruitment advertisement specified the following eligibility criteria: livestock farmers receiving agricultural subsidies, having prior experience of inspections, and holding views on animal welfare support and control. Twelve sheep and cattle farmers from different regions of Finland volunteered to participate in the study. The sample was not intended to be representative but was based on convenience sampling. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

2.3 Interviews

Prior to the interviews, participants received an information sheet describing the study, along with a privacy notice, by e-mail. The interviews were conducted either remotely via Microsoft Teams ($n = 10$) or in person ($n = 2$) between September and December 2024. Each interview session began with a brief introduction to the

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the interviewed farmers and their farms.

Background characteristics	Number
Gender:	
Female	6
Male	6
Age:	
30–39 years	3
40–49 years	8
50–59 years	1
Experience in livestock farming:	
< 10 years	1
10–19 years	8
20–29 years	3
Works full-time on the farm	10 ^{a)}
Part-time farmer, primary employment outside the farm	2
Species:	
Sheep	2
Bovine	10 ^{b)}
Farmer's own assessment of farm size:	
Small	2
Medium	5
Big	5
Organic farming	5

a) one producer had ceased (dairy farm).

b) seven suckler cow farms (one also had a calf rearing unit), and three dairy farms.

study and the interview procedure, after which informed consent to participate was obtained.

At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked a set of background questions (Table 1), after which the interview followed the structured interview guide (Supplementary Material 1). The interviewer ensured that all predefined thematic areas were covered; however, the order and depth of discussion varied between interviews. Questions that were not relevant to the interviewee were omitted. Interview durations ranged from 40 to 80 minutes. During the data collection process similar viewpoints began to recur across interviews, indicating that the main views from this interviewee group were captured. In relatively homogeneous study populations, approximately 12–13 interviews are typically sufficient to achieve saturation (Hennink and Kaiser, 2022). Given the diversity of production types in Finnish agriculture, saturation should be interpreted with caution; the sample over represents organic and suckler cow farms, and further interviews with dairy and conventional farms, or farmers with other production types might yield additional themes.

2.4 Ethics statement

The questions presented in the interviews and responding to them was estimated not cause to harm to participants as defined by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, TENK (2021),

and therefore there was no need to request an ethical review in advance of the study.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study. To assure participants' confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information was removed from the transcripts. Participants were referred according to identification number which are used in the Results section to identify the source of quotations.

2.5 Thematic analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Anonymized summaries of the interviews were further analyzed. The text of the interview summaries were coded using ATLAS.ti software. The codes were developed by reducing the quotations to concise expressions (Figure 1). These codes were grouped into categories using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). No predefined themes were used in the analysis. Instead, codes and categories were iteratively refined throughout the analytical process and repeated readings of the texts, with simultaneous identification of interrelationships between categories leading to the emergence of key themes. At this stage, the approach also incorporated a deductive dimension, when the identified codes and categories were grouped and labelled into broader entities (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Independent peer debriefing or co-coding was not conducted; however, the coding scheme was reviewed by the supervising professor.

The initial analysis revealed two distinct groups of themes: the roles of farmers, authorities, and industry formed one group, while themes related to administration and legal protection formed another. In addition, codes related to the development of the subsidy system were analyzed separately. This article reports the findings related to the identified roles and development of the subsidy system.

2.6 Use of AI tools

The quotations supporting the presentation of the findings were translated from Finnish into English using Microsoft 365 Copilot (version 2.20260402.46.0) with the prompt: "Translate into English, adapting to the spoken language." The semi-structured interview guide (Supplementary Material 1) was translated using Microsoft 365 Copilot (version 2.20260611.61.0) with the prompt "Translate this document into English and create a new Word file from the translation."

3 Results

The outcome of the analysis was nine categories under three themes that describe the farmers' perspectives on the roles of farmers, industry and authorities in animal welfare (Figure 2). In this study, "industry" refers to dairies and slaughterhouses. "Authorities", in turn, refers to both local and regional authorities involved in animal welfare and subsidy controls at the farm level as well as central authorities, namely Finnish Food Authority and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. First, the findings are presented through the categories that emerged under each identified theme. This is followed by farmers' perspectives on the future development of animal welfare support schemes to better meet the animal welfare objective of CAP and the characteristics of an optimal support system.

Quote

"It should somehow be made easier so that people would actually want to ask for help — even if the organization is a supervisory authority. It should be a place you can draw support and resources from, not just sanctions." (I5)

Code

A supportive attitude of the authority

Category

Attitude and competence of authorities

Theme

Role of authorities

FIGURE 1

The process of reducing a quote to a code, combining codes to a category and ultimately to a theme.

3.1 Role of farmers

3.1.1 Attitudes and competence of farmers

Farmers' perceptions of the subsidy system and animal welfare were analyzed. The interviews for this study highlighted the need to adapt to the current system as part of EU-era agriculture. Farmers' attitudinal responses towards the subsidy system were dichotomous; it was criticized, yet it was also considered normal, as described by one farmer in his fifties:

"...that I've basically only ever lived through the EU era in farming, so you kind of just get used to it in a certain way." (F3)

Commitment to subsidies and an understanding of what one has committed to also emerged. When legislation was complied with, supervision was considered welcome at any time. Farmers wanted to take as good care of animals as possible. One farmer described this as follows:

"Farming has changed a lot over the past few decades, but in a way it's become kind of a given that the animals are treated well ... if someone tries to cut corners on animal care, people see that as totally unacceptable." (F4)

When subjected to animal welfare or animal-related subsidy inspection, farmers' positive approach was identified as facilitating

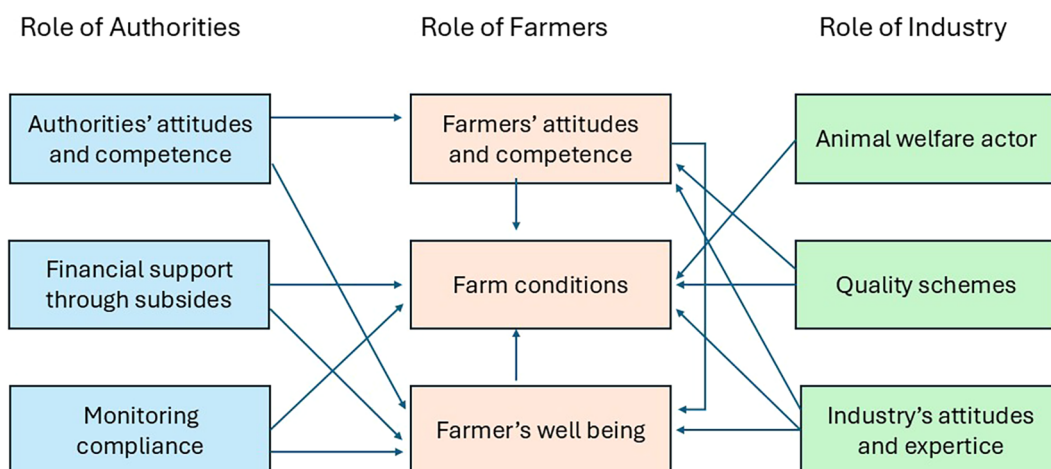


FIGURE 2

The themes (headings) and categories (boxes) represent interviewed farmers' perceptions of the roles of authorities, farmers and industry regarding supporting animal welfare and their interlinks, arrows show the direction of effect.

smooth conduct of inspections, although the responses also revealed distrust in the authorities. Farmers were also concerned about the resources of authorities, for example, unnecessary visits due to unannounced supervision if the farmer was not home. In contrast, joint visits by two supervisors were considered favorable, as they could often speed up the inspection. On one hand, it was hoped that supervision resources would be allocated to actual problem farms; on the other hand, regular supervision of all farms was considered good. Typically, situation at own farm was considered good, but the risk at other farms was recognized, which was described by one farmer:

“We call the vet pretty easily without worrying too much about the cost ... But then there are farms where a vet never shows up except for the mandatory health care visit, and during those visits everything magically looks fine.” (F8)

Participants’ attitudes towards the increasing administrative burden were negative. The interviews highlighted the large amount of paperwork, which was not considered to benefit animal welfare. Plans presented on paper may differ from reality, which was described as follows:

“But all that paperwork has just grown so much, and to me it’s really far from what things are actually like on the farm.” (F10)

Interviewees mostly had sufficient information about the support conditions and what was required to receive the support. The most important sources of information were the various communication channels of the Finnish Food Authority, as well as farm advisors and other personal contacts. Knowledge of both the support system and animal welfare was considered important, and the training requirement for young farmers was particularly highlighted as a good requirement. The main reasons for using farm advisory services were the complexity of the support system, the efficiency of time use, and the use of the advisor as a “verifier” after most of the support application had first been done by the farmer. To develop competence, a need for training, especially education on subsidies that affect animal welfare, emerged in the interviews. Training events were also mentioned as good opportunities to get to know inspectors and other authorities. Relevant training of farmers is also a statutory requirement monitored during controls, which was considered positively by a sheep farmer:

“And the thing I’ve always thought is the most important is that the key factor in a sheep’s wellbeing is having a skilled caretaker. They actually asked about that — what kind of training you have and how much experience — and I felt that was a really positive thing.” (F1)

Managing the farm economy was also identified to require expertise and skills. The financial management of farms also included making the necessary adjustments to ensure animal welfare. The adjustments included reducing or increasing the number of animals, changing the direction of production, and

negotiating longer payment terms. An increase in costs was considered to occur faster than an increase in income.

3.1.2 Farm conditions

Farm conditions refer to the structures, farm environment and management practices on the farm identified in the interviews that have an impact on animal welfare. Grazing and access to outdoors for walking were perceived as important conditions that increase animal welfare. This was highlighted by one farmer as follows:

“But really, letting the animals graze is still the most important thing.” (F6)

The factors that reduced grazing included autumn soiling and weather protection requirements, as well as subsidy policies that did not encourage grazing. One factor that restricted grazing was the fear of wolves, which could attack grazing animals, causing them to escape, be injured, or die.

Larger indoor areas for animals also emerged as a concrete condition that was considered to improve welfare. Overly precise measurements of the physical environment were criticized; simultaneously, the importance of the animal’s experience was also recognized:

“...for example these floor-space requirements – like for calves – they’re defined so precisely but honestly what matters way more is the actual conditions in the pen, not whether there’s 2.5 or 2.4 square meters of space.” (F7)

Deep litter systems were deemed good for the animals; however, tension emerged between the slatted floor and deep litter farming in several interviews regarding the rules for subsidies. One farmer suggested that flooring and bedding should also be considered in subsidies:

“But the basic livestock subsidies are the same for everyone — for us with a deep-bedded barn that takes about four thousand euros’ worth of peat every month, and for others who keep their animals on concrete slats in pens. So couldn’t the subsidies be more focused on actual animal welfare?” (F3)

Other farm conditions affecting animal welfare that emerged in the interviews included planned feeding, sufficient water supply (where the placement of water bowls is important), calving and sick pens, good barn air quality, cattle brushes, and in suckler cow production, the opportunity for the calf to stay with the dam for a long time.

3.1.3 Farmer’s well-being

The impact of farmer well-being on animal well-being was repeated during the interviews. Networks came up as a component of farmers’ well-being. The support networks that emerged in the interviews included the farmer’s association, the production chain,

farm relief services, peer support, parents, the farm advisor, authorities, and the farm veterinarian. One interviewee summarized the farmer's well-being as follows:

"The farmer's wellbeing is the most important thing. If the farmer is doing well, the animals will be doing well too." (F12)

Farmer well-being was also described as being affected by the farm's financial situation. The recovery of subsidies was identified as a risk to start or reinforce negative developments on farms.

3.2 Role of industry

3.2.1 Industry partner as actor of animal welfare

Many insights emerged regarding the industry's potential to influence animal welfare. Pricing and utilizing the industry's quality systems were seen as powerful means. In contrast, a stricter and more active role was expected from industry in relation to non-compliance. One producer of beef cow-calf herds described the paramount role of slaughterhouses:

"If they set some requirement that we have to meet, then we basically have no choice but to do it — otherwise our product won't move forward. So they have a really big impact." (F6)

In interviews, it was found that slaughterhouses did not have as clear a pricing basis for welfare as some dairies. Welfare criteria for pricing at slaughterhouses included daily growth rate and considerations for the dirtiness of animals. The role of slaughterhouse was described by one farmer as follows:

"We don't really hear anything from the slaughterhouse side except, if there's some manure contamination ... like if it's that time of year and the bedding hasn't been great or whatever." (F10)

The dairy sector uses pricing elements that involve welfare measures, which were described as flexible, stress-free, and encouraging. The roles of animal transporters and milk truck drivers were highlighted as people who visit farms onsite and have the opportunity to detect signs of animal welfare problems.

3.2.2 Quality schemes

Not all interviewed cattle farmers participated in the national animal health care system (Naseva). Sometimes, national health care was perceived as being more related to food security and medication than to monitoring welfare, as described by one farmer:

"I feel like Naseva is more about food safety — like, that's really what it's focused on. You log all the medications there, and the slaughterhouses can check so you don't accidentally send in an animal that still has a withdrawal period. But does that directly improve animal welfare in any real way? I'm not sure." (F3)

In contrast, Naseva visits were seen as beneficial, and the farm's own activity was also considered to influence how helpful Naseva visits were. Difficulties in interpreting legislation were also reflected in Naseva visits, as described by one farmer:

"...even if our own vet says everything meets the requirements, it doesn't necessarily mean the inspector will think the same." (F2)

The animal-based indicators that emerged in the interviews included observations made at the slaughterhouse regarding the body condition of the animals, live weight, daily growth, and carcass rejections. The dirtiness of the animal is assessed at the slaughterhouse, primarily for food hygiene reasons. The dirtiness of animals was explained to be related to the season.

3.2.3 Businesses' attitudes and expertise

Business expertise emerged as important in supporting barn construction planning. In the sheep sector, producer training was conducted in collaboration with a slaughterhouse. The interviews also revealed a phenomenon in which the industry distances itself from a producer who has been found to have deficiencies in official animal welfare control:

"The industry does try to help, but I've also seen cases where, once someone really falls off the wagon, the dairy and meat companies just want to wash their hands of it." (F5)

3.3 Role of authorities

3.3.1 Authorities' attitudes and competence

Regarding the authorities, the following aspects classified as attitudes were considered important by farmers: easy approachability and availability, clarification of issues, and flow of information between authorities. It was considered important that the administration was committed and encouraging.

Important qualities of an authority conducting control on a farm included practical experience in animal care, expertise in supervision, and a general understanding of the production of animals and different forms of production, as well as different everyday conditions on farms. A good supervisor was considered an ordinary person. Diplomacy, understanding, easy approachability, and flexibility emerged as characteristics of a good supervisor. In addition, the supervisor was expected to be suitable for the task, knowledgeable about what they supervised, not to look for faults, and not to be "faceless." The ability to identify issues relevant to animal welfare was also considered important, as expressed by one participant:

"Farms can do things in different ways without it putting the animals' welfare at risk." (F1)

3.3.2 Monitoring compliance with legislation

Good supervision was described to involve discussion, consultation, and a human approach. Reporting on inspection findings during supervision was considered important. Good supervision was described to be carried out in cooperation.

The most frequent risk of jeopardizing legal protection and causing stress was the difference in interpretation. Inspection was also felt to be unequal, due to regional and inspector-specific differences in interpretation. An experienced dairy farmer described this as follows:

“Even if ten people would say the animal is clean, but then the inspector spots some tiny little dirty spot somewhere and decides it’s not clean — that’s exactly the kind of thing that really scares me in all this.” (F2)

The control documents were described as understandable, however, they were also found to contain “veterinarian language” or be otherwise difficult to understand, but the nature of legal language gained understanding. Standardized check-in-box control documents were considered the most understandable and consistent way to conduct inspections. However, the documents did not always make it clear what the decision was based on:

“The recovery decision wasn’t clear. They’ve listed all the legislation they refer to ... and it feels like they just produce those decisions in bulk and throw in almost all the same regulations and EU laws every time.” (F7)

The complexity of the system and the long processing times for appeals were highlighted. Although legal assistance had been used in litigation or claims for rectification, the challenge was to find legal assistants familiar with agriculture and the support system.

3.3.3 Providing financial incentives through farm subsidies

Subsidies were considered financially significant for farms and, through this, also for the welfare of animals. In contrast, the loss of subsidies emerged as a concern because the deterioration of a farm’s finances also involved the risk of deterioration in animal welfare.

Not all interviewees had applied for welfare payments. The welfare payment was considered clear but inflexible, and some animal groups, such as non-grazed slaughter heifers, were excluded from the system. The welfare payment was considered economically significant on the one hand, but small in relation to the costs and workload on the other. The welfare payment was found to have an impact on animal welfare, but the risk of a zero effect was also identified. The welfare plan, which is a condition for welfare payment, was considered both necessary and unnecessary. It was felt to guide people to plan animal welfare, at the same time its significance was questioned. Two critical farmers described the effect of the welfare plan:

“I don’t know if that really encourages them to apply for the animal welfare payment and do all that stuff ... the only thing

that really changed for me was that now I’m making the welfare plan.” (F11)

“...the welfare plan right now is basically just a piece of paper where you explain things in principle ... But it doesn’t necessarily reflect the actual animal welfare in any clear or guaranteed way.” (F9)

Investment support was considered the most significant subsidy affecting animal welfare, even though many interviewees had not utilized it. Difficulty in obtaining external financing was seen as a challenge in using investment support. Investment support was also identified as having the potential to increase prices. The impact was assessed to arise from both smaller, concrete welfare investments and larger new construction projects:

“Especially when you’re building something new, it all comes down to the investment subsidy — and nowadays that subsidy has all these rules, like you have to meet the animal-welfare support requirements and all that.” (F12)

Subsidized farm advisory services were not identified as having a clear benefit in supporting animal welfare, although their intended uses included advice on health matters, health care visits, feeding planning, grazing planning, and assistance in applications for welfare payments and investment subsidies. Advisory services were perceived to have indirect impacts on animal welfare through consultations on investment subsidies and welfare payments. Criticism arose regarding the “trickle-down” of support to advisory organizations.

Subsidies for organic farming were perceived to improve animal welfare, especially through longer grazing and outdoor access requirements, larger space requirements, and later calf weaning than conventional production. Organic farming was also felt to verify animal welfare better than, for example, welfare payments.

Conditionality was recognized as a “minimum requirement” of animal welfare, and a deterrent effect also emerged; however, the conditionality system was considered difficult and foreign. The recovery of subsidies through conditionality and imposition of administrative sanctions were observed to carry a risk of deterioration in animal welfare, for example, when the animal keeper’s financial possibilities to purchase feed, bedding, or care for the animals deteriorate, even if the non-compliance was related to something other than animal welfare requirements. The conditionality system was also felt to be unfair:

“If you forget something like a soil sample, they cut a certain percentage off all your subsidies, even though it makes no sense at all. That money comes straight out of my own paycheck and kills my motivation ... and animal welfare sure doesn’t improve at that point — if anything, it gets worse.” (F3)

Several subsidies were identified to affect animal welfare. Some environmental subsidies promote animal welfare through grazing opportunities. Animal-based payments were perceived to support animal welfare but the risk of keeping unwell animals was also

identified. Milk production support was considered important for animal welfare because of its regularity; however, the differences in the payment basis between regions were perceived as unequal, and the per-liter basis was identified to include a risk of reducing animal welfare through excessive production burden. EU support for native breeds was also mentioned to support animal welfare; however, for sheep, it was identified to pose a risk to animal welfare because of the so-called intermediate lambings, which strain ewes too much. For sheep, the quality premium for slaughter lambs and the ewe premium were considered significant in terms of animal welfare; the former through good growth of lambs, because good growth requires good care and conditions, and the latter generally through securing the farmer's finances, similar to other animal premiums.

In summary, all subsidies affect animal welfare either directly through higher welfare requirements or by securing farmers' financial opportunities. One farmer described this as follows:

"Pretty much all the subsidies help improve animal welfare. Even though they're administratively split into crop-side and animal-side payments, for a livestock farmer like me a big part of the investment into animal welfare really does come from those subsidy euros." (F5)

lambs twice a year, and replacing the per-liter basis of milk support with dry matter or fat and protein content as the support basis. The time span of agriculture was highlighted in the development of the support system; for example, investments have long-term effects.

Reducing overlapping supervision and further developing the risk-based sampling approach also emerged as important considerations. Supervision of all farms was raised as an alternative to sample-based supervision. This was linked to the idea of pre-emptive supervision, which was raised in the interviews. Pre-emptive supervision was considered fairer for the farmer and, given the reduced number of farms, also feasible in terms of the use of resources.

A certain level of prior verification is in line with the idea of a welfare or quality label, which also came up in the interviews. Labelling was expected to increase transparency for consumers and create opportunities for higher income either commercially or through a support system, once the implementation of specific measures had been validated. The interest in labelling was described by a sheep farmer:

"But if that information were opened up — maybe through quality labels — then we could show consumers that our farm maintains biodiversity and grazes traditional pastures." (F1)

3.4 Developing farm subsidy system to better support animal welfare

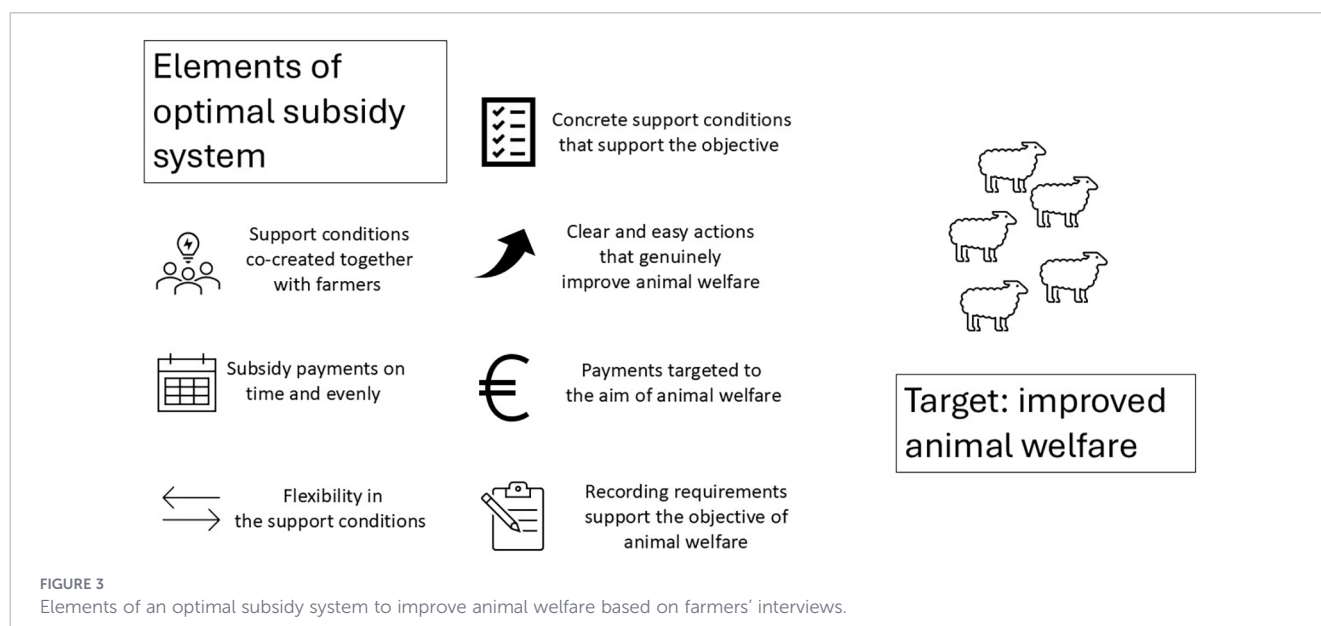
The interviews also enquired about the development of the support system from the perspective of subsidies that affect animal welfare to better meet this goal. Based on the developmental ideas and criticisms of the support system that emerged from the interviews, the characteristics of an optimal support system to support animal welfare were formulated (Figure 3).

Scheduling payments to better support the needs of farmers was important to secure steady income. Specific development proposals for subsidies that affect animal welfare included hoof care, shearing

4 Discussion

4.1 Role of farmer

The first category comprised farmers' attitudes and competence. Attitudes were considered to include attitudes towards animal subsidies, subsidy controls, animal welfare, and animal welfare controls. Regarding attitudes towards animal welfare, the findings indicate that animal welfare was prioritized, even over the farmer's own welfare, and farmers considered taking good care of



animals as an obligation. In a previous Finnish study examining farmers' perceptions of animal welfare, Kauppinen et al. (2010) found that farmers' intentions to improve animal welfare were explained through their attitudes towards providing animals with a favorable environment, taking care of animal health, treating animals humanely, and taking care of the farmer's own well-being. Using willingness to pay as an indicator, Läpple and Osawe (2023) found that most Irish farmers were willing to pay more for improved animal welfare, suggesting that altruism motivates farmers to provide welfare beyond that required for optimal production.

Hansson and Lagerkvist (2012) measured farmers' attitudes toward animal welfare and health and concluded that farmers differ in their attitudes to animal welfare and tend to organize their production to be compliant with welfare standards depending on their understanding and knowledge of animal welfare. Roe et al. (2011) studied the conduct of farm animal assessments, and they found that farmers' attitudes towards animals are significant in terms of animal welfare, either improving or impairing welfare. It has previously been found that farmers sometimes view animal welfare as part of health or comfort (Hansson and Lagerkvist, 2012) or as being linked to productivity (Kauppinen et al., 2010). In this study, health or productivity did not emerge as categories. This might depend on different contexts of the interviews, or it may mirror farmers' attitudes towards animal welfare being as valuable in itself in contemporary farming.

Regarding farmers' attitudes towards subsidy or animal welfare controls, some farmers considered controls on farms to be welcome, while others considered it to be unnecessary, or create administrative burden corresponding to the findings of Anneberg et al. (2012); Veissier et al. (2021) and Lundmark Hedman et al. (2022) who all studied farmer's perceptions of animal welfare inspections. The inspection of all farms was supported to some extent because it was supposed that some farmers did not comply with legislation or support requirements, which may reflect the need to protect the industry's reputation (Läpple and Osawe, 2023).

The study identified paperwork and accounting requirements as a source of dissatisfaction among farmers. This finding supports earlier observations by Anneberg et al. (2012) and by Escobar and Demeritt (2017) who describe complaints about paperwork as a "universal" phenomenon among farmers. Escobar and Demeritt (2017), whose study on farm record keeping in England included interviews with both farmers and animal welfare inspectors, found that although the intention regarding paperwork is good, audits can become performative. As a result, farmers may fulfil the requirements by form filling rather than caring for the animals. The same risk could be recognized in this study, associated with welfare plans, which are mandatory to receive animal welfare payments; a plan could describe the care for animals in a different way, which was the reality.

Competence emerged as the second component of the first main category. Henttu et al. (2017) identified in their report on the development of agricultural production control and inspection practices a lack of knowledge among farmers regarding the requirements. Väärökalä et al. (2019) who studied the non-compliances in Finnish cattle and pig farms based on official inspection reports,

concluded that the reasons behind non-compliance regarding calf housing conditions could be farmers incompetence to find legislative information, reluctance to comply due to investment costs, or inability to see the future benefits of taking good care of calf welfare. However, in another study examining farmer's perceptions on animal welfare inspections, Väärökalä et al. (2018) found that 81% farmers considered themselves sufficiently familiar with animal welfare legislation. Adams et al. (2025) conducted a review-based assessment of the impacts of EU agricultural policies on the sustainability of the livestock sector. They raised the need for training on animal welfare to comply with EU legislation in and the need for additional training also emerged in this study. Farmers need information to comply with regulations. In Finland, authorities' obligation to provide information on its activities and services is stated in Finnish Act on Openness on Government Activities (621/1999, section 20). Instructions from the authorities help to understand the legal situation; however, they can also lead to information overload, in which case the goal of clarifying the legal situation is not achieved (Eppler and Mengis, 2004).

The second category comprised farmers' perceptions of farm conditions, for which they are responsible. In this study, farmers often considered grazing as an important factor influencing animal welfare. However, from the qualitative material it is not possible to conclude that the themes occurring most often are more meaningful than others. In Sweden, farmers considered free access to pasture the fourth important factor affecting cow welfare, although perceptions varied with some farmers considering pasture as one of the most important factors of welfare, while others considered it unnecessary (Lundmark Hedman et al., 2022). In Finland, dairy cattle grazing decreased between 2020 and 2023 (Väre et al., 2025). There are several reasons for this decrease, including the increasing prevalence of barnyards as grazing is mandatory for dairy calves and heifers kept in tie-stall barns. In Germany and Austria, the provision of grazing areas and straw bedding have been supported with animal welfare payments (Bergschmidt et al., 2021). The comfort for animals is often dependent on flooring and bedding. In this study, slatted floors were not considered to support animal welfare. Consistent with present findings Kauppinen et al. (2010) identified sufficient space, solid floors, comfortable and sufficient bedding, and access to pasture as essential environmental factors for animal welfare in farmer interviews.

Farmers' well-being constituted the third category regarding the farmers' roles. In this study farmer well-being and animal welfare were considered dependent on each other, and farmers considered taking care of their own well-being an important means of improving animal welfare. The finding is consistent with the results of Kauppinen et al. (2010), who also concluded that farmers' well-being can be a limiting factor in providing good care for animals. Farmer well-being was also described as being affected by the farm's financial situation, indicating that well-being is also linked to farmers' financial expertise. A positive relationship between dairy cow welfare and the economic performance of farms was also shown by Brennan et al. (2021) in a study examining the use of welfare standards as sustainability indicators. In a review by Hötzel et al. (2025) they focused on farmer's attitudes towards animal welfare and the factors influencing the adoption of welfare-friendly

practices. They concluded that the relationship between farmers' well-being and animal welfare interacted with farmers' feelings, values and motivation as well as farmers' attitudes towards animal welfare. These previous findings support the interconnectivity between farmers' well-being, financial competence, and attitudes towards animals.

4.2 Role of industry

Industry was recognized as strong animal welfare actor. Industry-imposed requirements and financial incentives were considered important drivers of the implementation of animal welfare measures on farms. Dairy operators' industry-driven supplement system was perceived as flexible, encouraging, and less stressful than the government's welfare support system. The risks of self-regulation, such as voluntary certification schemes, include the non-binding nature of standards; lack of, or weak sanctions; less transparency; inconsistency between actors; and administrative burden (European Commission, 2010). Statutory requirements arising from both EU and national legislation and industry's private standards may appear as a coexisting administrative burden for farmers (European Commission, 2026). This is also the case in Finland (Henttu et al., 2017) and Sweden (Lundmark Hedman et al., 2022), where private standards of the industry include requirements similar to those of official controls.

The second category identified within the role of industry concerned quality assurance schemes. Private standards have previously been considered to improve animal welfare (Clark et al., 2016). In Finland, the national health care program for cattle, Naseva, operates under an association maintained in cooperation with the dairy and beef industries (ETT, 2026). All Finnish dairy farms, 57% of suckler cow farms, and 97% of beef production farms are members of Naseva (Väre et al., 2025), but for sheep, a similar national health care system does not exist. During national health care visits, issues related to animal welfare are assessed and recorded in the information system. The standards in health care programs are based on the minimum level required by national legislation. Therefore, if health care program standards are met, conditionality for animal welfare should also be complied with in official controls. However, farmers perceived uncertainty due to variations in interpretation.

As part of the interim evaluation of Finland's CAP Strategic Plan, Väre et al. (2025) also assessed measures affecting animal welfare. They found that the most common measures of farms aiming at improving animal welfare within the framework of slaughterhouse or dairy requirements were most often related to promoting grazing or outdoor access for walking of cattle. This finding supports the observation of this study that farmers perceive grazing opportunities as an important factor supporting animal welfare. Väre et al. (2025) also conducted interviews with experts, in which the importance of quality schemes of slaughterhouses and dairies in promoting animal welfare was evaluated to be greater than that of investment subsidies, subsidized advisory services, or welfare payments. In some countries, information on farmers participating in private assurance or certification schemes is considered to lower the risk of non-compliance, and these farms are less

frequently subjected to official controls (Escobar and Demeritt, 2017). To promote multilevel governance, participation in private control schemes should be acknowledged when planning risk-based controls.

Attitudes were combined with expertise in the third category of industry roles. The industry provided expert support, for example, in the planning of construction projects. Animal welfare supports the business economy of industries and good welfare can also be considered as part of the quality of a product (Bonafos et al., 2010). The interviews also highlighted the importance of animal welfare for the industry's reputation. Läpple and Osawe (2023) included farmers as part of the industry in their study, and from that perspective they concluded that industries' attitudes mainly reflected their need to avoid non-compliance with animal welfare. The findings of this study indicate that good animal welfare among farms connected to the specific industry operator is considered good for business image but also relates to product quality. The interviews also revealed that in the case of animal welfare non-compliance, the industry may distance itself from the farm. This possible loss of support from industry highlights the importance of identifying and addressing animal welfare risks at an early stage before problems arise.

4.3 Role of authorities

Farmers' perceptions of the attitudes and competence of authorities formed a category under the role of authorities. In this study, farmers expressed their wish that supervisors would have an understanding or experience in farming or animal husbandry. Previous research on farmers' perceptions of animal welfare inspections has similarly emphasized the importance of inspectors' expertise and their understanding of farming conditions and practices (Anneberg et al., 2012; Lundmark Hedman et al., 2022). Distrust towards authorities also emerged in this study as well as the need for the inspector to be familiar. This likely reflects that familiarity increases trust (Choudhury, 2008). Based on the findings of this study, familiarity of authorities may also help reduce stress associated with inspections.

Monitoring compliance also formed a category under the role of authorities. Co-operation, reporting inspection findings and clear inspection documents emerged as features of good monitoring practices. Henttu et al. (2017) recommended in their report improving farmer instructions and control documents to make them more understandable. In addition, they highlighted that the inspector should clearly explain to the farmer what the inspection is about, what is being inspected, the non-compliances found, and how the conclusions of the inspection will proceed. Clear communication, customer encounters, and interactions play a major role in the experience of regulatory burden (Rantala et al., 2018). Inspections also offer an opportunity to share information. In a study by Veissier et al. (2021) both farmers and inspectors were interviewed. The authors found that reviewing legislative requirements and inspection findings with the farmer improves compliance and thus also promotes animal welfare; however, this requires that inspectors are sufficiently familiar with the legislation and its rationale. According to Veissier et al. (2021), the effectiveness of

advice provided during supervision is strongly influenced by whether negative observations have been made on the farm. These findings support the view that inspectors need both a strong understanding of the legislation and strong interpersonal skills to conduct effective controls.

The findings of this study highlight the need for a uniform interpretation of legislation. Inconsistency in interpretations was brought up as a factor that endangered legal protection. Interpretations have also been found to vary in previous studies on animal welfare inspections (Anneberg et al., 2012; Lundmark Hedman et al., 2018). If the requirements are open to interpretation, farmers cannot anticipate them. Inconsistency among supervisors has been found to increase administrative burden and lead to non-compliance with legislation (OECD, 2014). The consistency of interpretations maintains trust in supervision. Ethical and trust-building actions by authorities require that everyone be treated according to the same rules and guidelines (Thomas, 1998). Trust in a public organization is improved by, for example, procedural regulations and standardized procedures (Choudhury, 2008), however, they may have other undesirable consequences for the operations of a public organization. A good example of this situation is the EU's financial rules, which are intended to increase trust in the use of public funds but at the same time make the process rigid and bureaucratic (Tanskanen, 2019).

Providing financial support emerged as the last but not the least role of authorities. Animal welfare is considered as public good and is thus justified to be supported with public subsidies (Grethe et al., 2018; Guyomard et al., 2021). This study found that numerous farm subsidies affect animal welfare, not only those traditionally considered instruments for supporting animal welfare in the CAP. The effect of subsidies on animal welfare was mainly through securing farmers' finances.

Farmers perceived investment support as a form of support that clearly affects animal welfare. The National Audit Office of Finland (2024) found that farms that applied for investment support were more profitable than average, but investment support system also enables the operation of poorly profitable farms because all those entitled to it can apply for support. Animal welfare investments do not necessarily mean major projects but may also consist of small-scale improvements. In 2023–2024 the most common subsidized investments for improving animal welfare in Finland included improving ventilation on cattle farms, purchasing air coolers and improving barn floor surfaces with solutions that improve sleeping comfort (Väre et al., 2025). The National Audit Office of Finland (2024) noted that there is a clear need to collect information on the effectiveness of agricultural investment subsidies. Guyomard et al. (2021) called for strengthening the criteria for investment subsidies and suggested that farmers should be able to prove that subsidized investments lead to improvements in animal welfare.

In this study, welfare payments were not identified as playing an important role in animal welfare, either because the measures would have been implemented anyway or only on paper. Similar findings were reported by Väre et al. (2025), who found that especially on sheep farms, welfare payment measures would have been implemented even without compensation. Furthermore, one quarter of the farms participating in their survey had not applied for welfare

payment. The reasons for not applying included increased bureaucracy, a small amount of compensation, and risk of being subject to supervision. Similar views emerged in this study, both with farmers who applied for animal welfare payment and those who did not. Despite these reservations, around half of the supervisory authorities interviewed by Väre et al. (2025) considered payments important for animal welfare, indicating that authorities' expectations for the effectiveness of welfare payments are higher than those expressed by farmers in the present study.

Organic farming subsidies were perceived to have a positive effect on animal welfare; however previous studies have reported conflicting results, varying from no effect (Bergschmidt et al., 2021) to better welfare (Hörning, 2000; Lundmark Hedman et al., 2018) compared to conventional farms. The findings of this study reflect the opinions of the interviewees, and do not produce evidence of differences between organic and conventional farming. Organic farms are controlled annually, with varying annual focuses, which also affect the compliance of those farms with regulations.

The effectiveness and proportionality of conditionality emerged as key concerns in this study. While cross-compliance has previously been criticized for its limited effectiveness due to relatively mild sanctions (Ryland, 2015; Escobar and Demeritt, 2017), the farmers interviewed often perceived current conditionality penalties as disproportionate or unfair, as even minor negligence may lead to reductions in all EU-funded subsidies. Similar perceptions of unfairness regarding subsidy recovery have been reported by Anneberg et al. (2012). At the same time, conditionality was not always well understood by farmers, reflecting earlier findings that both subsidy requirements and their supervision can be difficult to interpret and implement (Henttu et al., 2017; Veissier et al., 2021; Lundmark Hedman et al., 2022). Moreover, previous research has shown that sanctions are often linked to administrative shortcomings rather than deficiencies in animal care (Escobar and Demeritt, 2017), which may further undermine perceptions of the system's effectiveness and fairness.

4.4 Development of the support system to better support animal welfare

The agricultural support system of the CAP is characterized by constant change. Recently, the focus has been on simplifying regulations and reducing administrative burdens. The slow pace of change is partly due to path dependency and institutionalization (Rantala et al., 2018; De Vries et al., 2019) which means that the solutions adopted have many advantages, making them difficult to dismantle. Support policies must also consider the long-term perspective of farming, especially regarding investments, as their impact will extend for decades (Väre et al., 2025).

The features of the optimal subsidy system for supporting animal welfare, based on the interviews, are presented in Figure 3. The importance of task ease in motivating improvements in animal welfare emerged, mirroring the findings of Kauppinen et al. (2010). Steady income also emerged as an element of the optimal subsidy system. In their review of European animal production regulation Guyomard et al. (2021) recognized stable income for farmers as objective of developing sustainable livestock systems. In optimal

subsidy system, paperwork should support the aim of improving animal welfare. Farmers in this study, as well as those interviewed by Escobar and Demeritt (2017) viewed caring for animals as a priority compared to paperwork. While documentation performed only to satisfy external demands is considered an administrative burden (European Commission, 2025), paperwork is important for consumer confidence, biosecurity and also support farm management (Escobar and Demeritt, 2017).

The importance of involving and consulting farmers in the preparation of support policies emerged as important for developing the subsidy system. A broader consultation of farmers' wishes and concerns would strengthen animal welfare policies by identifying actions that engage farmers and issues that may give rise to disagreements (Sørensen and Fraser, 2010; Anneberg et al., 2012) and to ensure fairer policies (Hötzel et al., 2025). From a regulatory burden perspective, consultation should be comprehensively targeted at relevant stakeholders to prevent the shifting of the regulatory burden from one stakeholder to another (European Commission, 2025). Participatory policy-making approaches are considered valuable in complex issues, and they have the potential to offer innovative and widely accepted solutions; however, deliberative processes must be adequately designated and implemented (OECD, 2020; Roth et al., 2025).

The findings of this study also revealed farmers' readiness for a welfare or quality label, which could improve the transparency of production and make consumers aware of production methods that go beyond the basic statutory level. However, consumers' willingness to pay for better animal welfare has been found to vary (Alonso et al., 2020; Heinola et al., 2023; Kühl and Schütz, 2024). Bonafos et al. (2010) highlight in their review on European animal welfare legislation that European consumers assume that animals have been treated well when purchasing a product. This is supported by a willingness-to-pay survey by Heinola et al. (2023), which showed that customers expect public policies to include measures that promote animal welfare. Several welfare labels of varying levels have been used in the EU for a long time; however, the need for a more uniform label has been identified (Blokhuys, 2004; Bonafos et al., 2010; Ingenbleek and Krampe, 2022). A functional welfare label provides consumers with accurate information and requires a reliable and usable farm-level welfare assessment system (Blokhuys, 2004; Jacques, 2014).

Ingenbleek and Krampe (2022) explored customer views on animal welfare labels in four European countries. Based on the results they question the current way of developing welfare labels: their effect on welfare has not been as strong as expected, and customers are confused by the variability of labels and their different levels. Instead, they propose a wider use of technology, in which animal welfare data are available in real-time for consumers to support their purchasing choices. The difficulty with the welfare label is the impact of different activities overall; one farm may focus on different things than another, but the overall welfare may still be the same (Blokhuys, 2004). In this study, the label for organic farming was considered as a validation of sustainability towards the consumer, although not entirely successfully. Organic farming goes beyond the basic level of some welfare requirements. The "pre-inspection" suggested in the interviews would validate a farm to a

level that would entitle it to certain subsidies, thus corresponding to the auditing used in quality labels.

The shift in animal welfare assessment from resource- or management-based indicators to animal-based indicators, which are measurable reflections of animal welfare, has been called for a long time (Keeling, 2009; EFSA (European Food Safety Authority), 2012; Jacques, 2014). Animal-based indicators identified in this study included slaughterhouse findings on health and dirtiness, and measurements of live weight and growth. In Finland, dirtiness is evaluated at slaughterhouses mainly for food hygiene, but it also indicates welfare issues. Assessing animal dirtiness during farm inspections emerged in interviews as an indicator with varying interpretations. Dirt can parch the skin, tighten the coat, and expose the skin to infection (Lundmark Hedman et al., 2018). In this study, dirtiness was linked to the season. In study by Lundmark Hedman et al. (2018) in Sweden dirtiness in cattle to be the most common non-compliance in both official and private controls and the season was a risk factor for non-compliances overall. Vääräkkälä et al. (2019) did not find a significant seasonal association between season and non-compliances in animal welfare controls in Finland. Increasing the use of animal-based indicators would require new competences from both inspectors and farmers (Keeling, 2009; Roe et al., 2011).

Bergschmidt et al. (2021) investigated the possibilities of incorporating animal-based indicators into the assessment of animal welfare alongside the action-oriented animal welfare support measures currently used under the CAP. Their findings suggested that both action-oriented and result-oriented elements are needed in animal welfare support measures to adequately promote and assess animal welfare. A result-based approach for CAP subsidies means shifting from subsidizing practices to results, which has been considered more efficient; however, Guyomard et al. (2021) remind that challenges remain in measuring and valuing outcomes. There is also a risk that animal-based welfare assessments are more open to interpretation than resource-based indicators (Roe et al., 2011). Animal-based data are widely collected; however, the data are not always in a usable form or available. For example, mortality data and data from farms belonging to production-following programs, health care programs, or quality label assessments could be used for both animal-based indicators during controls and for the evaluation of the effectiveness of subsidy policies.

4.5 Limitations and validation of the study

Qualitative research describes and explores views and experiences in a specific area. The thematic analysis used in this study does not produce information that could be used to describe a specific group in a representative manner (Braun and Clarke, 2022). However, the findings describe the themes that emerged from the interviews in this study and help to understand and explain phenomena affecting animal welfare and the roles of different stakeholders.

The distribution of interviewees did not correspond to the distribution of Finnish farms; suckler cow farms and organic farms were more eager to participate in the interviews. This may be because farmers of these production types are more interested in

animal welfare than the average. A weakness of this study was that the meaning of animal welfare was not defined together with the interviewees. Farmers' understanding of animal welfare may differ between farmers, as reviewed by [Sørensen and Fraser \(2010\)](#). Welfare can be good or bad, which was recognized in the interviews, as welfare deteriorations also emerged.

[Bayvel and Cross \(2010\)](#) identified several national stakeholders in animal welfare policy and practice in New Zealand, including representatives of farmers, authorities, and industry. They also identified the roles of international actors, such as non-governmental organizations, customers, and researchers, which also came up in interviews in this study but not strongly enough to be identified as themes. In Finland, an interim evaluation ([Väre et al., 2025](#)) of the current CAP period was conducted shortly after the interviews in this study partly dealt with the same questions regarding the effectiveness of welfare payment and investment support. There is much in common in the findings, which reinforces both studies' findings and highlights a phenomenon in thematic interviews, where current discussion topics emerge more in the target group at certain times than in others. The result of the thematic analysis is a snapshot of the big picture of the current discussions, but at best, it can also reveal something that is "stirring beneath the surface" ([Polat, 2025](#)).

In qualitative research the result is interpretation of the researcher ([Creswell and Creswell, 2018](#)). Before, I had been working as an official veterinarian, which formed the basis for the interpretation of the findings. During prior work on farms, I encountered the complexity of subsidy schemes, administrative burden, and frustration expressed by both farmers and supervising authorities. To address potential bias, I critically reflected on prior assumptions during the analysis, with particular attention paid to identifying and mitigating preconceptions to maintain analytical objectivity and to allow the data to guide the findings.

5 Conclusions

This study identified that, from the farmers' perspective, farmers, industry actors, and authorities each have distinct roles in promoting animal welfare. However, these roles are interconnected ([Figure 2](#)). Farmers must have sufficient competence and well-being to care for animals and to manage farm economy, which is influenced by both industry and authorities in the form of revenue and subsidies, respectively. Insufficient income or cuts in subsidies can affect farmers' abilities to manage farm economy and may thus risk the state of animal welfare. Increasing farmer's knowledge of animal welfare and legal requirements is important to support compliance and reducing risk of subsidy reductions.

This study identified several developmental needs for enhancing the effectiveness of animal welfare-related support. Given the challenges of quantitatively evaluating effectiveness, qualitative methods can provide an important complementary perspective. An optimal support system requires clear rules and requirements that genuinely align with welfare objectives. Farmers should be more systematically involved in the preparation of support policies, as broader consultations would enhance the relevance and feasibility of the proposed measures.

Finally, this study shows that wide range of agricultural subsidies can influence animal welfare. Therefore, animal welfare impact assessments should be conducted systematically for all agricultural and related policies, including environmental regulations that affect grazing opportunities. This broader perspective aligns with national guidelines ([Finnish Government, 2022](#)) and European principles, requiring the evaluation of animal welfare in all European Union legislation and policies that involve the use of animals (TFEU, 13 article). Sustainable biocircular economies require animal production systems that are both socially acceptable and ethically responsible. The sustainable use of biological resources cannot be achieved without considering animal welfare. Despite its importance, animal welfare remains a largely overlooked social and ethical dimension of the biocircular economy, highlighting the need for further research on how animal welfare can be more effectively integrated into biocircularity frameworks.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available due to confidentiality. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to TS-J, terhi.simonen@fimnet.fi.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because of the criteria for need of evaluation according to instructions of Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) were not met. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

TS-J: Project administration, Formal analysis, Validation, Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Software, Visualization.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Generative AI was used for translating the quotes from Finnish to English. The prompt is provided in the article and the translations have been checked by the author. In addition, generative AI was used to check grammar and improve language fluency.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fanim.2026.1896500/full#supplementary-material>

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