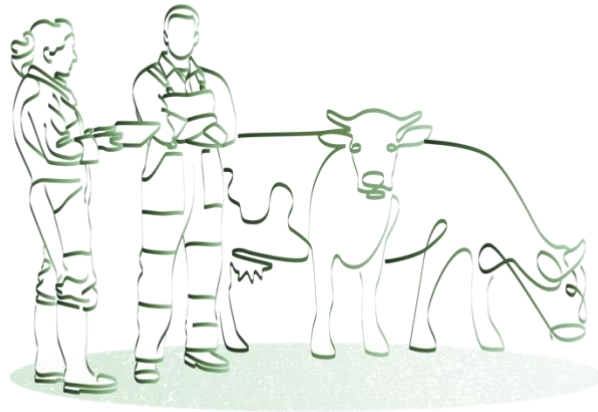


Inspector@work: Västra Götaland, Sweden



I'm an animal welfare inspector for all types of animals, including ruminants and horses. I've been working in this field since 1999. I had no formal education, instead I slipped into this profession on a banana peel! A part-time role was advertised in my home municipality and I had already worked a lot with both cattle and horses, here in Sweden and abroad. I had a lot of prior experience from other jobs such as milking, horse and cattle care - some of it with the Swedish Blue Star volunteer defence organisation, some alongside an equine veterinarian. So that's how I got into the animal welfare inspector track.

There is no particular specialisation for equine and ruminants, it's a common enough requirement that we all need to have the expertise to do these inspections. So we visit all types of cattle and horse farms - mostly over the winter as that's when the animals are housed indoors. In the summer, there may be some requirements that need to be checked but the animals are out at pasture and so less of our time is needed on routine controls.

I like the dairy farm visits. We have good contact with the owners and there are always exciting new things to be learnt. It's interesting to see how each farm distributes the work among the staff available, especially on the larger farms, and the different approaches on how they care for their calves. In Sweden, it's common to keep calves on the farm until they enter milk production. Large enterprises with good farm management in place have clear directives and well-developed procedures for keeping track of animals at all stages of production - for example where to house them, to avoid overcrowding. Not all large enterprises are good at this yet, some farms take a more reactive approach to solve problems as they arise, which isn't always efficient or good for the animals' welfare.

Equine farms have their own challenges with different size facilities and different conditions to be discussed, depending on whether the horses are kept for sport, recreation or breeding. Horse owners at a hobby level have no real economic outcomes or production requirements, and this can be reflected in the animal husbandry, welfare and knowledge. This is the animal I know best with over 40 years of experience working with horses, so I am firm in my advice when it is needed.

In terms of welfare, I think it's much better for ruminants these days - like the ban on tethering male animals. But there are still some things that I'd like to see improved further, for example we now have a recommendation that all horses have to be in a paddock or field every day, but there is no minimum time suggested for how long they should be outdoors. Some things like this need more guidance.

Have the humility to admit when you don't know the answer straight away

The job is challenging - you have to always be up to date with the latest regulations and developments. We have to be able to ask relevant questions and have the appropriate information to maintain a good dialogue with the animal owners. There are so many rules to keep track of, and you cannot always have everything available just off the top of your head. It's a bit easier if you only have to be familiar with the rules and regulations of one type of animal, but at our workplace we have to be able to inspect all animals. It makes it difficult to have a depth of knowledge in all fields. I keep myself updated as much as possible by reading reports, attending lectures etc.

I find that many new, younger, colleagues are afraid to make mistakes. I try to teach them that it is not bad to admit when you don't know something. It's better to be honest and ask the owner to explain how or why they do something in a particular way. This is how we learn from each other. Sometimes I need to come back to an animal owner after I've checked the regulation requirement in more detail. It's important to have these difficult conversations, to have the humility to admit when you don't know the answer straight away. But we also need to come back with the correct information. If the gap in knowledge is too great, often there is a colleague with more experience in that particular field, and it is better if they do the follow-up inspection.

I'd like to see EU regulations moving towards Swedish and Nordic standards

There are also some rules and regulations that don't necessarily apply in Sweden, but we have to enforce - such as extreme heatwave alarms. It's not a bad thing to be required, but it's just not relevant in our climate. Personally, I'd like to see a regulation for all cattle over 6 months to have outdoor exercise. The grazing requirement is so important because animals move on pasture in a way that is impossible to replicate indoors, even with loose housing. Dairy cattle with outdoor access have better calving rates, and there is a lower risk of premature culling. I think it's important for them to be able to move around freely in outdoor conditions, allowed to choose whether they want to lie down or stand in the rain or sun.

I think that it is great that Sweden does have stricter regulations in some cases, because sometimes the EU regulations are more focused on the animal produce (milk, meat and eggs) rather than the health and welfare of the animals themselves. To meet the basic EU condition requirements, we spend most of our time checking documentation of drug and hormone usage, rather than assessing the animals themselves for body condition, hoof status, signs of discomfort or pain etc. In this respect, I'd like to see the EU regulations move towards Swedish and Nordic standards in animal welfare.