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OPINIONS OF ORGANIC AND FREE-RANGE BROILER FARMERS ON ANIMAL WELFARE AND THE EBENE® APP FOR ANIMAL WELFARE SELF-ASSESSMENTS

E. Graat*(1), L. Warin (2), C. Vanden Hole (3), T. Rodenburg (4), M. Pertusa (5), A. Collin (6), F. Tuyttens (1)

(1) ILVO and Ghent University, Melle, Belgium, (2) ITAVI, Nouzilly, France, (3) ILVO, Melle, Belgium, (4) Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands, (5) ITAVI, Haut mauco, France, (6) INRAE, Université de Tours, Nouzilly, France

**Presenting author*

Corresponding author mail: evelien.graat@ilvo.vlaanderen.be (Evelien Graat)

The EBENE® app was designed by ITAVI to let poultry farmers conduct welfare assessments of their own animals. It contains specific assessments for organic and free-range farms. The app focusses on animal-based welfare indicators and includes automated feedback and anonymous benchmarking. A longitudinal study on free-range and organic broiler chicken farms in Belgium and France has started in order to determine the long-term effect of the use of the app on animal welfare. At the start of the study, a survey was conducted among the participants (n=14) to assess their views on animal welfare and expectations of the EBENE® app. This survey will be repeated at the end of the study to document possible changes in their opinions. Answers were given on a scale of 1 (disagree completely/not important at all) to 7 (agree completely/very important). The farmers were asked to rate the importance of 15 welfare indicators related to the app. The highest scores were given for water availability ($\bar{x}$=6.7, sd=0.6), food availability ($\bar{x}$=6.6, sd=0.7) and enough space ($\bar{x}$=6.4, sd=0.8), while the lowest scores were given for possibilities to use enrichment ($\bar{x}$=5.2, sd=1.8), on-farm killing method ($\bar{x}$=5.4, sd=1.7), and reaction to humans ($\bar{x}$=5.7, sd=1.2). Thus, it seems that resource-based welfare aspects received high scores, whereas aspects related to positive behaviour and animal handling received lower scores. This indicates that perhaps more information should be provided to farmers to increase awareness of the importance of behaviour and animal handling for welfare. Farmers were also asked to rate their own performance on these same indicators. A comparison of the two scores showed that they gave a lower average score for their own performance than for the importance of the welfare aspect for 11 of 15 aspects. The difference between the two scores was largest for absence of wounds/lesions ($\bar{x}$1-2=0.6, sd=0.9), absence of footpad dermatitis ($\bar{x}$1-2=0.4, sd=1.1) and absence of lameness ($\bar{x}$1-2=0.4, sd=0.9). Thus, it is likely that these are the welfare aspects for which the farmers think improvement is most desirable. Farmers rate the expected usefulness of an app for welfare assessments with a 4.5 out of 7 (sd=1.6). This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement N°816172. The study complies with the EU regulations and ethics requirements and all participants signed an informed consent form.