Nitrate and nitrite in feed

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European Commission recommends the monitoring of nitrate and nitrite in feed

Commission Recommendation (EU) 2026/2297 of 16 October 2026 on the monitoring of nitrate and nitrite in feed and the prevention of nitrate and nitrite in certain feed materials

Update

The European Commission recommends that European Union (EU) Member States should work with farmers and feed business operators to monitor nitrate and nitrite levels in animal feed.

Concerns have been raised that these substances, which may be present in forage, roughage, and products or by-products from sugar beet, sugarcane, starch, and alcoholic drink production, could cause health problems in animals. More data are needed to understand these risks better.

The Commission's Recommendation does not introduce new legal maximum levels for nitrate and nitrite in animal feed. Instead, it proposes good practices and guidance that includes the following.

- Nitrate in water: limit nitrate levels to 200 mg/l in water used for animals to drink or for feed production.
- Nitrate in feed: avoid giving pregnant animals feed containing more than 4,000 mg/kg of nitrates. For other animals, limit the amount of this feed. These levels are based on feed containing 12% moisture.
- Nitrite in feed: limit nitrite levels to 200 mg/kg, expressed as sodium nitrite ($NaNO_2$). This level is based on feed containing 12% moisture.

Impacted products

Feed for farmed animals

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What is changing?

This Commission Recommendation aims to encourage EU authorities, farmers, and the feed industry to collect information about the presence of nitrate and nitrite in feed (from forages and roughages, sugar beet/sugarcane products and by-products, starch and alcoholic drink production).

The data collected will support the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in future risk assessments and possible future regulations.

The Recommendation does *not* introduce new maximum levels for nitrate and nitrite in feed. It does recommend good practices and principles, set out in the Annex, to reduce nitrate and nitrite in feed and animal exposure to these substances. These include:

- harvesting plants close to maturity and raising the cutter head (to reduce the presence of nitrates that are found in the bottom part of the stalks)
- feeding animals with silage
- limiting the level of nitrates in water used for drinking by animals or manufacturing feed to 200 mg/l
- avoiding giving pregnant animals feed that contains more than 4,000 mg/kg nitrates (where the feed has a 12% moisture content), and limiting the amount of this feed given to other animals
- not using feed containing more than 200 mg/kg nitrite as sodium nitrite (NaNO2) (relative to a feed with a moisture content of 12%).

Why?

EFSA (2020) identified a possible health concern for ruminants relating to the presence of nitrates in forages and roughage. It could not assess the health risk from exposure to nitrite in farmed animals due to a lack of data. EFSA needs more information on both elements to do a full risk assessment.

Timeline

EU Member States and the feed industry should regularly submit monitoring data in line with EFSA's Data Collection Framework.

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What are the major implications for exporting countries?

Countries exporting feed to the EU should expect increased scrutiny of levels of nitrites and nitrates in forage and roughage products, and of nitrite in products and by-products from sugar beet, sugarcane, starch, and alcoholic drink production.

Exporters of feed for farmed animals should be aware of this initiative, as monitoring results may be used in future EU feed safety measures.

Recommended Actions

Food businesses and competent authorities in exporting countries may wish to review processing practices in line with the proposed good practices.

Following developments in EU monitoring and risk assessments will help exporters to anticipate potential new EU rules.

Background

Directive 2002/32/EC establishes maximum levels for nitrite in feed materials, with the exception of silage, products and by-products from sugar beet, sugarcane, starch, and alcoholic drink production. Today there is no maximum limit for nitrate in feed. However, farmers are encouraged to apply good practices to prevent high levels of nitrites and nitrates.

Resources

EFSA (2023) Risk assessment of nitrate and nitrite in feed. EFSA Journal, 18(11): 6290.

Sources

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