On-farm animal welfare: Review of EU laws

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EU to review on-farm animal welfare rules, including for imports

On-farm animal welfare for certain animals: modernisation of EU legislation

Update

The European Commission is reviewing its on-farm animal welfare rules, in particular relating to the use of cages (for laying hens, pigs, calves, pullets, broiler breeders, layer breeders, rabbits, ducks, geese, and quails), and the killing of male day-old chicks in the laying hens sector.

The on-farm animal welfare rules of the European Union (EU) currently do not apply to imports of animals and animal products.

The European Commission is carrying out the second step of the public consultation (after the call for evidence in July 2025), and has published a questionnaire to gather feedback on:

- the species that should be considered in relation to phasing out cages, and possible barriers to meeting these objectives
- to what extent on-farm animal welfare rules should apply to imports into the EU, notably for poultry, eggs, pork, veal and beef, milk, rabbits, and their respective products.

Impacted products

Laying hens, pigs, calves, pullets, broiler breeders, layer breeders, rabbits, ducks, geese, quails, and their products

What is changing?

The European Commission's (2022) fitness check on EU animal welfare legislation concluded that it is no longer fit for purpose. The legislation is no longer aligned with societal and ethical expectations, as clearly shown by the End the Cage Age European Citizens' Initiative.

The Commission is in the process of reviewing the legislation, and as part of its public consultation has published a questionnaire.

Seven of the questions are particularly relevant to non-EU countries exporting to the EU.

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- 3–5: Phasing out cages for certain categories of animals: the EU is seeking data to help determine which species this should apply to; identify the main barriers to meeting these objectives; and learn what supporting measures may be required.
- 7–8: Extending the application of EU measures to imported animal products: which products do stakeholders believe should be covered (poultry, eggs, pork, veal, beef, milk, rabbit, and their respective products); and what measures could support the transition to equivalent animal welfare standards in non-EU countries?
- 10: Identifying animal welfare indicators (e.g. for behaviour, injuries, mortality): could indicators improve the implementation of animal welfare rules, or support benchmarking or monitoring?
- 11: Systematic killing of male day-old chicks in the egg production sector: how urgent is it to move away from this practice?

Why?

Animal welfare is one of the priority areas for action identified by the EU Vision for Agriculture and Food 2025–2029. In particular, the Commission emphasises the importance of maintaining fair competition between imported products and those produced in the EU. The drive for a review of animal welfare rules is primarily a response to public concerns about the use of cages for certain animals and the killing of male day-old chicks.

Timeline

The European Commission aims to carry out consultations in 2025 and present a proposal for new rules in 2026.

What are the major implications for exporting countries?

EU rules concerning on-farm animal welfare do not currently apply to imported animals or animal products. A revision of current rules following this review could impose new requirements on exporters of these products to the EU.

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Recommended Actions

This consultation provided an opportunity to provide feedback on the Commission's review of how EU animal welfare production standards are applied to imported products, in line with international rules. Exporters of animal products (in particular pork, poultry, calves, beef, milk, eggs rabbits, and their respective products) could identify steps that could contribute to improving animal welfare, or aspects of EU animal welfare rules that could potentially be challenging for exporters (see Background).

Feedback via the European Commission's Have Your Say webpage closed on 12 December 2025.

Background

Council Directive 98/58/EC sets out minimum standards for the protection of all farmed animals. This includes the conditions under which animals must be bred or kept, taking into account their needs on the basis of experience and scientific knowledge. It covers animals' freedom of movement, buildings accommodation, feed and water, and breeding procedures. It also includes issues related to the management of farms such as staffing, inspection, and record keeping.

More detailed rules are set out in specific legislation for:

- Broiler chickens: Council Directive 2007/43/EC
- Calves: Council Directive 2008/119/EC
- Laying hens: Council Directive 1999/74/EC
- Pigs: Council Directive 2008/120/EC

For an overview, see the European Commission webpage Animal welfare on the farm.

Resources

Council Directives:

98/58/EC concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes

2007/43/EC laying down minimum rules for the protection of chickens kept for meat production

2008/119/EC laying down minimum standards for the protection of calves

1999/74/EC laying down minimum standards for the protection of laying hens

2008/120/EC laying down minimum standards for the protection of pigs

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European Commission (2022) Staff Working Document: Fitness Check of the EU Animal Welfare legislation

European Commission: Animal welfare on the farm

Sources

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