Revision of animal welfare rules

Published by AGRINFO on 17 Sep 2023

Proposed revisions to EU animal welfare rules: Current status

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system. COM/2020/381 final.

Update

The European Commission plans to revise the EU animal welfare rules. Four main areas of animal welfare are likely to be affected: at farm level; during transport; at slaughter; and labelling. However, there is uncertainty about the timetable and the likely extent of the changes.

Background

The EU Farm to Fork Strategy states that the Commission aims to publish proposals revising EU animal welfare rules by the third quarter of 2023. In early September there was speculation about this timetable, and whether the Commission may be lowering its ambitions in order to avoid stricter welfare rules that could contribute to higher farming costs and food inflation (Food Navigator Europe 2023; Brussels Times 2023a). The Financial Times (2023) went as far as suggesting that the Commission is "considering scrapping plans" on new rules. Over 600 animal welfare experts sent an open letter to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on 7 September calling for the swift publication of proposals (Euractiv 2023). However, von der Leyen's State of the Union speech to the European Parliament on 13 September reported on many aspects of the EU Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy, but did not mention animal welfare (Brussels Times 2023b). Commission officials have insisted that animal welfare remains very much on the agenda (Brussels Times 2023b).

As this legislation is taken forward, the EU aims to take action in four main areas.

Animal welfare at farm level

New rules are expected to cover a wide range of issues, including nutrition, environment, health, behaviour, and mental wellbeing of animals. There has been considerable public pressure to "End the Cage Age" – to eliminate the use of cages in animal farming.

EU legislation on animal welfare at farm level currently does not apply to non-EU countries, which must only provide guarantees regarding animal welfare at slaughter. This may change

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under new proposals consistent with the EU aims to influence global practices and ensure that EU farmers are not at a competitive disadvantage from non-EU countries with less rigorous standards (European Commission 2020). The End the Cage Age proposal, for example, could have an impact on non-EU exporters of animal products from laying hens, calves, rabbits, pullets, broiler breeders, layer breeders, quail, sows, ducks and geese, and would require changes in animal husbandry.

Animal welfare during transport

The Commission is also considering reinforcing rules related to the treatment of animals during transport, focusing on the following areas.

- Comfort of animals: requirements regarding the conditions in which animals travel, in particular travel times, space provided, and temperature limits. Particular attention will be paid to unweaned and vulnerable animals.
- Means of transport: requirements aimed at upgrading livestock vehicles and road vessels.
- Improved monitoring: a new EU centralised IT system providing live data to help enforce stricter welfare rules.

Current EU legislation on animal welfare during transport (Regulation 1/2005) only applies on EU territory. The Commission is considering to what extent revised rules can apply equivalent protection of animal welfare to imports of live animals (currently in small quantities).

Animal welfare at slaughter

The Commission is considering strengthening the existing rules (Regulation 1099/2009), as follows.

- Poultry: either a complete ban on water bath stunning for poultry, or limiting the speed of slaughter to less than 8,000 birds per hour.
- Pigs: phasing out high-CO2 stunning.
- Ruminants: a complete ban on electric prods, or limiting their use to cattle only.
- Farmed fish: new requirements on pre-slaughter and slaughter methods to protect certain species of farmed fish (European sea bass and gilthead sea bream, potentially Atlantic salmon, common carp and rainbow trout).

Other options being considered include a preapproval system for stunning and restraining equipment; and the requirement to approve individual slaughterhouses to ensure that workers are properly trained and animal suffering is minimised.

New proposals would apply to meat and meat products (and potentially fish) exported from non-EU countries to the EU. This would require non-EU competent authorities to address extended animal welfare compliance when approving meat or fish for exports.

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Animal welfare labelling

Today, there is no EU-wide legislation on animal welfare claims or labelling. The Commission is considering a range of options, from minimum requirements for all animal welfare claims on food (e.g. general principles, conditions of use, scientific evidence) to voluntary or mandatory animal welfare labels. This could be limited to distinguishing whether animals are farmed in cages or in non-cage systems (reflecting public support for End the Cage Age), but may extend to a broader range of animal welfare issues.

Impacted products

live animals, animal products

Timeline

The Commission intended to publish proposals revising EU animal welfare rules by the third quarter of 2023, but this timing may change. Discussions of these proposals by the European Parliament and Council of the EU are expected to take about 3 years. The proposals are expected to include long transition periods that will allow operators to adapt to new rules.

Resources

Brussels Times (2023a) Animal Welfare: Will the EU Revise Legislation As Promised?, 12 September.

Brussels Times (2023b) State of the Union 2023: Has animal welfare legislation disappeared from EU's Agenda?, 13 September.

Euractiv (2023) Open Letter: 637 stakeholders call on Ursula von der Leyen to publish animal welfare proposals in current political term, 7 September.

Financial Times (2023) EU Considers Dropping Stricter Animal Welfare Measures, 11 September.

Food Navigator Europe (2023) Is the EU Stepping Away from Commitments to Sustainable Food Systems Animal Welfare?, 14 September.

Online resources from the European Commission:

- EU Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012–2015
- Animal welfare – revision of EU legislation [closed consultation, feedback available to view]
- Staff working document – Fitness check of the EU animal welfare legislation

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- Fitness check of the EU legislation on animal welfare of farmed animals – Fitness Check Roadmap
- EU Platform on Animal Welfare and Thematic sub-group on Animal welfare labelling
- Inception Impact Assessment on the revision of the EU legislation on animal welfare [download].
- Options: Animal welfare labelling. Fifth meeting of the Animal Welfare Labelling Subgroup [Powerpoint].
- Special Eurobarometer 442: Attitudes of Europeans towards Animal Welfare

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