

How the EU nudges us to be nicer to animals

The European Union is typically characterised by high politics and complex economics, so animal welfare is unlikely to feature high in the annals of its activity. Yet it has quietly crept up the agenda. Today the EU is a leading driver of rules on the ways animals are kept and treated, reflecting the changing European attitudes to their welfare, and scientific research into animal distress.

Over the past 44 years, there have been 45 EU legislative acts relating to animal health and welfare, the high point being the 2009 definition of animals as “sentient beings” in the EU’s Lisbon Treaty. This January, the European Commission set up a 75-member expert group on the issue, called the Platform on Animal Welfare: its inaugural meeting, set for June, is expected to integrate animal welfare into broader, more global agendas such as sustainable food production.

It is now broadly accepted that animal welfare is an integral part of the decision-making process for policies on animal health (including antimicrobial resistance), food safety and quality, and the environment (climate change, water use). As Vytenis Andriukaitis, the EU’s Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, says, “**A European Union which strives to get closer to its citizens and to promote its positive image must have animal welfare among its core values and its operational priorities.**” This was confirmed by a [Eurobarometer](#) survey published last year which revealed that 94% of those interviewed believed it was important to protect the welfare of animals.

Positive EU influence

A European Parliament research paper in January said EU animal welfare policies and rules have had a positive influence for animals, sustainable growth, human and animal health, and biodiversity. “The image of the EU has been improved by this kind of legislation as it is viewed as an indicator of a civilised society” said the report’s author, Cambridge University professor Donald Broom.

But the report noted that EU law currently excludes several important farmed species. While there is legislation for the commonest animal kept for human use in Europe, the broiler chicken, there is no specific welfare legislation for 340 million farmed rabbits, 170 million ducks, 150 million turkeys, 83 million sheep, 10 million goats, and 88 million bovines (with the exclusion of calves kept for veal production). The second and third most farmed species, salmon and trout (1 billion and 440 million, respectively), are also not protected by any legislation. It added that the Lisbon Treaty reference to animals as sentient beings effectively implied they should not be referred to as merely property, and urged the EU to ensure legislation not directly concerned with animal welfare should be amended to reflect this.

New measures on live transport

Commissioner Andriukaitis told the European Parliament’s [Animal Welfare Intergroup](#) in February, that the EU should be proud of being at the forefront of animal welfare on the global stage. Half of the 12 actions in the 2012 EU Animal Welfare Strategy have been completed. This year, the Commission will publish new studies on best practices on transport and slaughter, as well as fish transportation. It will make recommendations on three specific areas: the 2007 EU Broilers Directive (on standards for chicken protection); on the killing of fish; and on international activities concerning animal welfare, including working with agencies like the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

The proposals on international actions are highly anticipated. Animal welfare groups have long pointed to poor conditions in countries that export to the EU, particularly in live transport, an area where Andriukaitis has pledged better enforcement measures. The Eurogroup for Animals last year launched a campaign on live animal transport, #StopTheTrucks, backed by other major animal welfare groups like Compassion in World Farming (CWF) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). The campaign calls for a maximum eight-hour journey time for all animals travelling for slaughter or 'further fattening' across the EU.

Live animal exports from the EU have grown sharply in recent years, up 25.2% in value terms in 2015 from 2014, with Turkey the main destination. An estimated billion poultry and 37 million cattle, pigs, sheep, goats and equines are transported within the EU and to third countries every year. They are often crammed in old vessels with dysfunctional ventilation and watering systems, and suffer severe exhaustion, dehydration, injuries, disease, and death. In April 2016, a cargo of 69 Belgian cows was left at the Bulgarian-Turkish border without any care, food or water and resting in their own excrement for five days. Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark have all called for a revision of the 2007 EU Animal Transport Regulation, to update existing standards.

Steady progress

The EU has come a long way over the years. The first piece of legislation to address concerns came in 1974 with a directive requiring farm animals to be stunned before slaughter. The 1980s saw measures on scientific testing on animals. In 1991, a directive was passed on the protection of animals during transport, while a 1998 directive addressed conditions for laying hens. Reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) shifted the EU away from intensive farming, offering rural development grants to farmers once they committed themselves to good animal husbandry practices. The use of animals to test cosmetic products has been banned since March 2013. The ban on seal products, enacted because the methods of killing the young seals was considered inhumane, was upheld by the World Trade Organisation in 2013.

Some critics say animal welfare has gone too far, and that the EU should not impose its values and standards on countries where animal welfare is seen as a costly distraction. On the other end of the spectrum, NGOs like the Humane Society International/Europe say the EU should go further, targeting financial institutions and member state export credit agencies that invest in projects involving farm animal confinement systems banned in the EU.

There is also a business case: animal welfare is now seen as a corporate social responsibility (CSR). A report last year by the [Business Benchmark on Farm Animal Welfare](#) found that improved farm animal welfare had emerged as a source of competitive advantage. "Increasingly, companies describe farm animal welfare in terms of the opportunities – financial and reputational – that can be delivered," it said. Some started many years ago: in 1999 under pressure from activists, fast food giant McDonald's started to monitor the animal welfare at its meat suppliers, soon followed by rivals Wendy's and Burger King.

The EU Platform on Animal Welfare is the latest step in a long process. It was formally proposed at an EU Agriculture Council in January 2016 by Sweden, Germany, Netherlands and Denmark; the latter three going even further in their [December 2014 Vught declaration](#) that also called for animal welfare research, cuts in the use of antibiotics, and legislation on the docking of pig tails. Intriguingly, Britain, a long-time supporter of animal rights, has suggested it might offer incentives to farmers to improve welfare standards after the UK leaves the EU.

While gathering stakeholders to exchange best practices should bring progress, the platform cannot be a substitute for completing legislation. But the EU's work in this area shows how it can foster change. By working to end animal hardship, the EU has not only moved in tandem with popular opinion, but its policies and legislation have improved the welfare of hundreds of millions of animals. As Commissioner Andriukaitis said, "We can proudly say that the EU is a global model on this."

Words: Leo Cendrowicz, Deborah Cwajgenbaum, (Burson-Marsteller Brussels)

Living without protection in the EU



83 million
SHEEP



10 million
GOATS



340 million
RABBITS



170 million
DUCKS



150 million
TURKEYS



88 million*
BOVINES



1 billion
SALMON



440 million
TROUT

* excluding calves for veal production

For more information on the EP study [click here](#)

