

International Association for Geophysical Contractors will be applying them in all waters of the UK continental shelf.

The guidelines cover the planning stage, procedures during the seismic survey, and subsequent reporting. At the planning stage it is necessary to contact the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) for information about which cetacean species may be present and for details of any specific precautions that may be required. The steps to be taken during the survey include a careful visual check for cetaceans from a suitably high observation post, starting 30min before its commencement. Involving experienced sea mammal observers is also urged. Where possible, hydrophones should also be used to help in detection – especially in conditions of poor visibility. The survey procedures should be delayed until 20min after the last sighting. Another important element, where the equipment allows, is to increase the power of the air blasts slowly to enable any animals which may be in the area to move away. Finally, forms are provided for recording information to be fed back to the JNCC to enable further refinement of future guidelines.

Guidelines for Minimising Acoustic Disturbance to Marine Mammals from Seismic Surveys. Joint Nature Conservation Committee (1998). Joint Nature Conservation Committee: Aberdeen. 13pp. Loose-leaf notes. Available from JNCC, Seabirds and Cetaceans Team, Dunnet House, 7 Thistle Place, Aberdeen AB10 1UZ, UK. Free.

Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986: ethical review process

In some countries (eg Australia, Canada and the USA) institutional ethical committees, consisting of people with a range of backgrounds, play a major role in regulation of the use of animals in research. Although some organizations in the UK have, in recent years, established committees or other ethical review processes to oversee ethical and other aspects of animal experimentation, there has been no government requirement for this. After debate and consultation on the matter, it has been announced that the Secretary of State now requires that an ethical review process be established and maintained in each establishment designated under Section 6 or 7 of the *Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986* (ASPA). Before 1 April 1999, all such establishments which do not already have viable ethical review processes are now required to develop these, and to explain and test them with ASPA Inspectorate. From that date, a local ethical review process will be required as a standard condition for all work carried out under the ASPA and for breeding and supply establishments.

The aims of the ethical review process are: (i) to provide independent ethical advice to certificate holders (persons licensed to carry out projects under the ASPA), particularly on project licence applications and animal care and welfare standards; (ii) to provide support and advice on these issues to named persons and licensees involved in the work; and (iii) to increase awareness of animal welfare issues and full application of the 3Rs (the principles of reduction, refinement and replacement) through the use of ethical analyses. Certificate holders will be responsible to the Home Office for the running of the process and the appointment of people to implement its procedures. As many people as possible should be involved in the ethical review process and they should include: a named veterinary surgeon; representatives of the named animal care and welfare, and research personnel; and, where appropriate, one or more independent layperson(s).

The document indicates the required framework and an outline *modus operandi* for the local ethical review processes. They should, for example, allow for promoting the 3Rs, cost-benefit

considerations, review of animal care and welfare standards, and advising on staff training and other matters. Once the local ethical review system is established, project licence applications will not be considered by the Home Office until the project has been subjected to the local system, although the Home Office will be happy to discuss ideas and to provide advice.

This is a significant change in the operation of the ASPA. The ethical review process is also seen as having a promotional and educational role – both for those involved in research and for those who are not. These are laudable aims. Providing they do not lead to a blurring of responsibilities, the establishment of local ethical review systems in the UK is to be welcomed.

The Ethical Review Process. The Home Office (1998). 3pp. Loose-leaf notes. Available from the Home Office, Constitutional & Community Policy Directorate, Animals, Byelaws & Coroners Unit, 50 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AT. Free.

Proposed EU Directive on protection of laying hens

This long-awaited proposal from the European Commission is based on the Scientific Veterinary Committee's 1996 report on the welfare of laying hens. The proposal is to replace Directive 88/166/EEC, which lays down minimum standards for hens kept in battery cages, with a new Directive covering the welfare of all laying hens. This introduces requirements for the provision of nests, perches and litter for dustbathing, but makes derogations for the continued use of existing cages for several years.

Article 3 of the proposed Directive requires, that from 1 January 1999 all new systems must provide at least one individual nest box per 8 hens, or at least 1 m² of nest space per 100 birds if communal nests are used. It also requires provision of adequate perching facilities and litter for dustbathing. However, until 1 January 2009, it proposes that member states may authorize derogations about the provision of nest boxes and dust baths under specified conditions, namely: if hens each have at least 800cm² space; if cages are at least 50cm high; and providing birds do not have their beaks trimmed.

The use of existing cages – those in use on 1 January 1999 – will be permitted for 10 years, providing that they allow at least 450cm² per bird and meet various other criteria which are consistent with current battery cage designs. However, cages which are more than 10 years old on 1 January 1999 must be phased out within 4 years. This falls short of the Farm Animal Welfare Council's recommendation that the present Directive be amended to require a minimum floor space of 600m² per hen in all battery cages within 5 years.

General conditions for laying hens are set out in an annex to Article 5 of the proposed Directive. These cover points concerning, for example, cage and equipment cleaning, air quality and thermal environment, lighting, and feeding. All birds must be inspected twice daily and daily written records of these inspections and any actions taken must be kept and available to the recognized authority.

Article 9 makes provision for future improvements by requiring the Commission to submit a report on systems of rearing and keeping hens to the European Council and Parliament by 2006. This is to include appropriate proposals to phase out systems that do not meet welfare requirements.

The proposed Directive has been referred for consideration by an official working party comprising representatives of all member states and the Commission; the European Parliament