

REPORTS AND COMMENTS

New Animal Welfare Bill for England and Wales?

In January 2002, the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) launched a consultation on a proposal for a new Animal Welfare Bill. In contrast to the situation in some countries that have recently developed single, all-embracing animal welfare laws, having had no laws at all on the subject hitherto, animal welfare legislation in the UK has grown in an organic fashion over a long period of time. Welfare provisions, of varying quality, are scattered through quite a number of Acts, some of which are many decades old. The proposal is to bring some of these together in one new Act and, in so doing, to update and modernise them. The intention is not to roll absolutely all of the UK animal welfare legislation together; some of the more modern Acts — the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (ASPA), the Zoo Licensing Act 1981 (ZLA), and the legislation concerning farm animals (most of which is now based on EC Directives) — are specifically excluded from the review.

When the Government announced, at the end of the initial consultation period (30th April), that it had received a large number of responses and that these indicated a great deal of support for the proposed new law, there were some misinformed howls of derision from the popular press about this 'bill of rights for animals'. Whilst it is understood that deliberations remain at an early stage, there are no indications that whatever may finally emerge will amount to a bill of rights.

In a recent speech at a Pet Advisory Committee conference, Animal Welfare Minister Elliot Morley said: "There has been a groundswell of support for a radical overhaul of our outdated animal welfare laws in relation to companion animals. In its day, the Protection of Animals Act 1911 was state of the art but it was written before anyone had begun to consider the need for considering good animal welfare in the round. We need practical laws that underpin the principles of responsible pet ownership. The question for pet owners and law enforcers alike has moved on from 'Is the animal being treated cruelly?' to 'Is the animal being properly looked after?'".

There is a good case for consolidating the welfare legislation, especially that relating to companion animals, and for drafting it in a modern format (like that of ASPA and the ZLA), in order to permit specific provisions — for example regarding husbandry standards — to be updated without recourse to changes in primary legislation. This would provide the flexibility required to enable it to be kept up to date and in line with scientific advances and expert opinion concerning animals' needs and welfare.

Development of this proposed new welfare bill will be a major task and it will be crucial that no important elements of the existing legislation are accidentally lost in the process. It is understood that the Government hopes to have a first draft ready for consultation in 2003.

Animal Welfare Legislation. 30 April 2002. Report of progress of the consultation. Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Available at <http://defra.gov.uk/news/latest/2002/petleg.htm>.

EC Scientific Steering Committee view on non-human primates in biomedical research

The Scientific Steering Committee (SSC) of the Health and Consumer Protection Directorate of the European Commission has recently published a statement outlining its views about the future need for the use of non-human primates in biomedical research. It has done this because it considers it necessary to raise awareness about the implications of a complete disappearance of non-human primate research facilities. The reasons why it has chosen to address this issue at this