

Reports and Comments

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Report of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on the Government's draft Animal Welfare Bill

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (EFRACOM) is the body appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the UK's Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its associated bodies. During the latter half of 2004 the EFRACOM, under the chairmanship of Mr Michael Jack, scrutinised the Government's draft Animal Welfare Bill and produced a report on this in December (see details below).

The Government published the draft Bill in July 2004. The current law is contained in over 20 pieces of legislation and the new Bill aimed to modernise this and provide protection for companion and kept animals including farmed animals. In addition to retaining the existing cruelty offence (based on the existing Protection of Animals Act 1911), the new Bill introduced a new offence of failing to take reasonable steps to ensure an animal's welfare.

In its summary, the Committee fully supports and welcomes the Government's initiative to modernise and improve animal welfare legislation but stated that: "We consider that the draft Bill raises many and often complex issues which must be resolved before a final Bill is presented to Parliament". The Report includes 101 recommendations on these issues.

Among the Committee's concerns were that the Bill would delegate very broad power to the Secretary of State in England and the National Assembly in Wales for subsidiary legislation, that there were unresolved difficulties in deciding which species should be covered (particularly with regard to various invertebrates such as crabs, lobsters and cephalopods), and that there were difficulties also with regard to the enforcement and prosecution provisions in the draft Bill.

The issues do indeed pose complex philosophical and practical challenges. Considering the short time in which it was produced, this is a thorough report and it is likely to be helpful in forging a robust piece of legislation for the future.

The Draft Animal Welfare Bill: First Report of Session 2004–2005 (December 2004). House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. 134 pp A4 paperback. Published by The House of Commons. Distributed by and available from The Stationery Office Ltd, PO Box 29, Norwich NR3 1GN, UK. www.tso.co.uk/bookshop.

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UFAW

Categorising the severity of scientific procedures on animals

In many countries, scientific procedures on animals are permissible only if the benefits are judged to outweigh the costs to the welfare of the animals involved. There has been much discussion of how welfare costs can be categorised in this context. In the UK, in applying for licences for work under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, scientists are required to assess the likely welfare cost to the animals involved in terms of severity: mild, moderate, substantial or unclassified. The Boyd Group (a UK forum for open exchange of views on issues of concern related to the use of animals in science) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) jointly organised a series of three focus group meetings on categorising the severity of scientific procedures, the discussions from which were summarised in a report published in July 2004 (see details below).

The three focus group meetings involved three groups: veterinary surgeons and animal care and welfare officers responsible for the welfare of animals used in scientific procedures; representatives of animal welfare and anti-vivisection organisations; and holders of project and personal licences under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. All three groups agreed that recognising, monitoring and assessing the severity of adverse effects is vital. However, difficulties arise through having to summarise what can be a large description of possible effects on welfare into one of four categories. Arguably it would be better to provide a fuller description of the nature of the risks to welfare with each procedure and project.

The severity categories are used also to provide public information on suffering. All three groups agreed that these data are not useful or appropriate for this purpose because they do not reflect the actual harms to the individual animals involved and do not indicate how or why the animals were used. All three groups agreed that retrospective reporting of the severity of adverse effects would provide the most pertinent information but opinion was divided about whether the effort to collect such data would be justified. The licencees and animal protection groups both suggested and agreed that there would be merit in research to compare predicted versus actual adverse effects.

The contents of the report include: background; the need for a severity categorisation system; the difficulties of the current severity system; suggested practical solutions to these problems; public information about severity; feedback on how the system is working in practice; and references. Reports of the three round-table discussions are included as Appendices. This is a useful contribution to the debate on this important and difficult subject.

Categorising the severity of scientific procedures on animals (July 2004). Summary and reports from three round-table discussions. Edited by Jane A Smith and Maggy Jennings on behalf of

The Boyd Group and the RSPCA. 45 pp, A4 ringbound. Published by and available from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Research Animals Department, Wilberforce Way, Southwater, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 7WN, UK.

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Welfare aspects of stunning and killing methods for food animals

At the request of the European Commission, the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), under the Chairmanship of Dr H Blokhuis, recently undertook a review of the main systems for stunning and killing the main commercial livestock species. The Panel had been asked to address, for each method used, and in the context of both routine slaughter and killing for disease control purposes:

- minimal conditions for efficient and humane use under field conditions;
- criteria for checking stunning and killing;
- advantages and disadvantages of the method in commercial and field conditions.

The Panel's report was published in June 2004. This is a very thorough and detailed review in which a considerable number of research priorities for the future are identified. Among the general conclusions are:

- "... the ability to move animals in groups with less handling and restraint is an advantage on welfare grounds of all gas stunning or stun/killing systems as compared with mechanical or electrical methods."
- "While carbon dioxide has many advantages, aversion ... to this gas at some level (usually above 20%) is clearly a welfare problem. Depending on how one interprets an animal's behaviour it is difficult to quote a level that will apply to all pigs and poultry. However, it is likely that levels above 30% in pigs and turkeys and 25% in chickens are at the least very unpleasant and that higher levels are aversive."

A variety of high research priorities relevant in the context of slaughter of animals for food are identified, and these include:

- development of appropriate methods for both mechanical and electrical stun and stun/kill methods;
- development of a field tool for measuring the velocity and power of captive bolts, and research to establish appropriate captive bolt dimensions for each species;
- that: "there is an urgent need to revise and scrutinise the electrical methods";
- that aversion to gas mixtures and the mental state of animals during the induction of unconsciousness needs further evaluation;
- development of humane gas mixtures and systems for pigs;
- further investigation to determine more humane gas mixtures for poultry;

- development of humane slaughter methods for species of farmed fish for which no commercially acceptable methods exist at present;

- as regards gas methods for killing for disease control, the report states that carbon monoxide is suitable for poultry and piglets and that although exposure to 90% carbon dioxide is very aversive, it may be the most practical.

Although, as a review, this report contains little new information, it will be of great interest and relevance to all those involved with livestock killing and slaughter and especially to those involved with directing research and technological developments in these fields.

Aspects of Animal Stunning and Killing Methods (June 2004). Opinion of the Scientific Panel for Animal Health and Welfare on a request from the Commission related to welfare aspects of the main systems of stunning and killing the main commercial species of animals, *EFSA Journal* 45: 1-29 (2004). 29 pp A4, with a 241 pp detailed annex to the report. Published by European Food Safety Authority -AHAW/04-027. Available at http://www.efsa.eu.int/science/ahaw/ahaw_opinions/catindex_en.html.

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Suffering and severity: report of a session at the Laboratory Animal Science Association's winter meeting

A session on suffering and severity with respect to the use of animals in research was held at the winter meeting of the Laboratory Animal Science Association (LASA). The subject was topical as the Boyd group (a UK-based forum for open exchange of views on issues of concern related to the use of animals in science) has recently completed a series of workshops on the perceived value of severity classifications under the UK Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. In addition, the European Commission is considering severity, among other issues, for its review of European Directive 86/609, and the UK's Animals Procedures Committee (APC), together with LASA, is developing a pilot study on a potential retrospective scheme to score suffering actually experienced by animals as part of its review of the published statistics on animal use in UK research.

Presentations given at the meeting focused on the purposes of assessing animal suffering and of assessment practicalities. The assessment of suffering is complicated by the fact that different species may show different indications of suffering, and that some of these signs are not obvious. Moreover, the experience of suffering changes by individual, by that individual's past experiences, and even as a result of the circumstances at the time of assessment. Nonetheless, accurate assessment of suffering is necessary in order to refine procedures, to carry out a harm/benefit analysis of proposed procedures and projects, and to provide public accountability. To do all these things there is a need to obtain a consensus on the causes of suffering, a