

Reports and Comments

EU platform on animal welfare

A new EU Platform on Animal Welfare has been launched by the European Commission following a Eurobarometer survey. Key findings of the survey (published in March 2016 and assessing the attitudes of Europeans toward animal welfare), indicated that 94% of EU citizens consider it to be important to protect the welfare of farmed animals and 82% believed that the welfare of farmed animals should be given better protection. Additionally, 74% of Europeans considered that the welfare of companion animals should also be better protected.

It is hoped that the new Platform will assist the European Commission with the development and exchange of co-ordinated activities on animal welfare with a focus on:

- Better application of EU rules on animal welfare through exchanges of information, best practices and the direct involvement of stakeholders;
- The development and use of voluntary commitments by businesses; and
- The promotion of EU animal welfare standards at the global level.

Seventy-five people attended the first meeting of the EU Platform on Animal Welfare, which was held on the 6th June 2017 in Brussels. Attendees included 40 public bodies (various EU Member States, European Economic Area countries, European Food Safety Authority, Food and Agriculture Organisation, World Organisation for Animal Health and The World Bank) and 35 private stakeholders with a focus on animal welfare. Private stakeholders were required to apply for their position on the Platform by 6th March 2017.

Attitudes of Europeans towards Animal Welfare (March 2016). A4, 86 pages. Special Eurobarometer 442. Survey requested by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety and co-ordinated by the Directorate-General for Communication. Fieldwork November-December 2015. ISBN: 978-92-79-56878-7. <https://doi.org/10.2875/884639>.

EU Platform on Animal Welfare (June 2017). Further information on the EU Platform, Platform Members, and Platform Meetings (including the presentations given at the inaugural meeting) are available online at the following address: https://ec.europa.eu/food/animals/welfare/eu-platform-animal-welfare_en.

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Brexit and farm animal welfare

Brexit is an abbreviation of ‘British Exit’ and describes the decision of the United Kingdom (UK) to withdraw from the European Union (EU) following a national referendum on 23rd June 2016. The formal process of leaving the EU began on 29th March 2017, and the UK now has two years during which it must negotiate a new relationship with the EU. Issues which need to be decided upon include: the rights of UK citizens in EU member countries (and *vice versa*); the Brexit Bill (the amount the UK will pay the EU to leave); the Northern Ireland/Republic of Ireland border; EU regulations and directives; and trade deals.

It is expected that Brexit will impact on farm animal welfare predominantly due to changes in legislation and trade deals. The UK Prime Minister, Mrs Theresa May, has previously stated that “We should be proud that in the UK we have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world — indeed, one of the highest scores for animal protection in the world. Leaving the EU will not change that... we are committed to maintaining and, where possible, improving standards of welfare in the UK, while ensuring of course that our industry is not put at a competitive disadvantage” (House of Commons Question Time, 8th February 2017).

The European Union Energy and Environment Sub Committee (part of the European Union Committee that considers UK Government’s policies and actions in respect of the EU and which is made up of members of the UK House of Lords) has recently published a Report entitled: ‘Brexit: farm animal welfare’. The Committee has stressed the need for Government to include animal welfare provisions when forming future free trade deals, and to clarify with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) whether developments in case law may allow the use of farm animal welfare as grounds for restricting imports under WTO rules. There is a concern that the Prime Minister’s regard for animal welfare may not transfer when new trade deals are discussed with countries that have lower standards of animal welfare than the UK — if post-Brexit trading relations lead to increased imports from countries with lower farm animal welfare standards, then the Committee observe that “UK producers could become uncompetitive. This could undermine the sustainability of the industry or incentivise a race to the bottom for welfare standards — contrary to the wishes of the UK industry.”

The Committee also believe that research should inform policy, but this may prove difficult if a lack of funding from the EU results in a science information gap (another

concern raised in the Report). Additionally, on leaving the EU, the UK will be outside the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) and, consequently, the Panel on Animal Health and Welfare. The Panel on Animal Health and Welfare have published many important, scientific documents on animal welfare, which have been used to inform policy across the EU. The Committee reflects that it will be important for the UK “to retain a degree of coordination with EFSA” and goes on to recommend that the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council is given a stronger remit and greater resources “to ensure that farm animal welfare policy continues to be evidence based”.

Another area in which Brexit may affect animal welfare is via a shortfall in veterinarians and migrant stockpersons. Currently, over 90% of Official Veterinarians (who work in abattoirs and carry out many animal health and welfare and food safety inspection and enforcement services) are non-UK EU 27 citizens. Additionally, many farms employ at least one migrant worker, and some abattoirs employ up to 75% of migrant workers. The Committee remarks that it

will be important for Government “to ensure that the industry is able to retain or recruit qualified staff to fill these roles post Brexit”.

The Report draws to a close with a section on consumers, and the role that they may play in ensuring that animal welfare standards are maintained. A number of approaches in which consumers may be helped to choose higher welfare products are put forward, including: retailers setting standards above a legal minimum; effective and transparent labelling systems; and assurance schemes.

The Report closes with 15 conclusions and recommendations covering: maintaining standards, trade, veterinary staff, the role of consumers, and financial support.

Brexit: Farm Animal Welfare (July 2017). A4, 42 pages. House of Lords European Union Committee 5th Report of Session 2017-19. Published by the Authority of the House of Lords.

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