

Dods summary of the meeting

On February 8, the European Parliament's Intergroup on the Welfare and Conservation of Animals held a meeting about the welfare of broiler chickens. The meeting included a presentation about the main animal welfare challenges in intensive broiler production and another presentation about the Eurogroup for Animal's position on broiler welfare, followed by a session of questions and answers.

Please find below a summary of the meeting.

Sirpa Pietikäinen (EPP, FI), President of the Intergroup, announced that the Intergroup would be sending a letter about the dog meat trade in Indonesia which will be sent via the EU's Ambassador to Indonesia. The President drew attention to the scandal related to the use of human beings and monkeys in tests by the German car industry and the Intergroup will be sending a letter to the three manufacturers. There will be an event on March 7, from 13h00 to 15h00 at the European Parliament, Brussels, about achieving coexistence between humans and large omnivores in the EU, including speakers from DG ENVI, the European Federation of Associations for Hunting and Conservation (FACE) and scientists. She informed the Intergroup that the official list names for the proposal to set-up a Special Committee on Animal Transport was submitted the previous day, listing 223 names. After the evaluation by the legal service, it will move to the Group leaders for a decision. She recognised that the EPP is not easy to deal on the issue and exhorted the members of the Intergroup to convince their Political Groups

Prof. Harry Blokhuis, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU Department of Animal Environment and Health, summarised the main welfare challenges for broiler chickens. The expert explained that there has been an increased progress in the growing capacity of these animals, reaching 1.7-2.5 Kg, in a short time, due to enormous genetic increase. He expressed his surprise that the animals' behaviour is still the same as their ancestors, showing the same social behaviour and needs, even though there was a high level of selection.

The expert explained that, usually, when the chickens are small, there is plenty of space in the stable, including good and forced ventilation, but that, when the animals grow up, the stable becomes much more crowded and darker. Most chickens are kept in flocks exceeding 20 or 30 thousand animals and the number of broiler slaughters is 53 billion per year, globally, and about 6.7 billion in the EU.

The expert then highlighted some of the welfare issues. He explained that walking ability is measured using a Gait score, from 0 (no abnormality) to 5 (complete lameness), that 15% to 25% of chickens are between a score of 3 to 5 and that when the animals reach a score of 3 they already have difficulty reaching food and water.

Another welfare issue is the barren environment since the stable is mainly an empty environment and specific behaviours, such as perching, are not possible. The lack of activity leads to health problems and increases fearfulness, due to the lack of stimulus for the animals. The solution is the enrichment of the environment to provide stimulus, including perches and platforms; panels, barriers and bales; the stimulation of foraging and dustbathing behaviour; novel objects; and outdoor areas.

Concerning food health, foot pad dermatitis is analysed through a score from 0 to 2. 0 means no lesions, 1 means mild lesions, and 2 means severe lesions. He explained that there is a considerable number of animals under a score of 2, mainly due to the litter quality, but also due to the feeding and ventilation.

High stocking density is also an issue, causing disturbance of behaviours, like sleep and dustbathing. The light in the stable is on for 18h and is constant, so some birds become desynchronised and the sleepy birds are disturbed by the active ones. Since there is no space to move, the birds mainly sit, leading to inactivity. The bad quality of litter is also a problem.

There are also welfare issues regarding the loading of the animals in trucks and crates for slaughter. One method involves the use of a machine to push the animals on to a conveyor belt, bringing them to crates. The other method is by hand and people grab four or five birds in one hand and carry them to the crates, he explained. There is a risk of the animals being damaged, including broken wings. The loading is very stressful for the birds, by hand, while hanging upside down. Studies have shown that there is less stress when the machine is used.

Regarding transport, the main problem is the climate during the transport. As for the slaughter, the shackling of the birds results in stress and pain. On the other hand, electrical stunning may result in pre-stun shocks and inadequate stunning.

On the way forward, the expert stated that regarding walking ability, the breeding and selecting must make an effort, including the use of slower growing hybrids and the enrichment of the stable to make the birds more active. Regarding the food health, management should improve the litter quality, including the climate, feed, floor heating, lower density, among others. Stimulating activity and behavioural possibilities with the development of enrichment, lower density and outside zones. The pain and stress at slaughter can be reduced with an improvement or changes in the stunning methods. Finally, regarding market demand, consumer awareness on these issues needs to be improved, including the possibility to increase the market demand for animal-friendly products.

Francesca Porta, Programme Officer - Farm Animals, Eurogroup for Animals, provided data on chicken and meat production and consumption. The production of chicken meat is increasing globally and the production in the EU grew 31.3% in the past 5 years, while the world production grew 22.7%. Broiler chickens cover 80% of the poultry meat produced, she explained, and 70% of the production is achieved by 7 Member States. Most of the production is owned by professional farms, meaning medium and big size.

The panellist explained that the minimum standards for broiler chickens are set down in Directive 2007/43, which entered into force in June 2010 and required transposition into national legislation. The main provisions concern the stocking density, requirements for the training of keepers, the development by Member States of good management practice guides, and the standards for drinkers, feeding, litter, ventilation, noise, light and inspection. She highlighted some of the aspects not covered by the Broiler Directive, such as a provision of enrichment materials, access to natural light, access to outdoors or covered outdoor area, welfare of breeding stock, and health issues related to selection for fast growth.

She stressed that the Commission is aware of the problems suffered by the chicken. According to recent reports by the Commission, slow-growing broiler chickens remain a niche market, the market pressure does not provide breeding companies with sufficient incentive to consider more the animal welfare standards, and the selection for fast growth is responsible for several animal health and welfare problems. There is also a problem of meat quality, including the green muscle disease. Nevertheless, the Commission concluded that no legislative proposal was deemed necessary.

A recent report by the Commission on the preparation of best practices on the protection of animals at the time of killing showed that it is difficult to achieve the required parameters in amperage for

every single bird entering the water bath, birds might lift their heads when entering the water bath, leading to a failure to stun. The shackling cause pain and the pre-stun shocks are likely.

The panellist further explained, concerning the enforcement of the Broiler Directive, that practices differ across Europe, the training for keepers is not offered everywhere, that different animal welfare indicators are used and that the allowed and trigger levels differ. So, no conclusion on animal welfare was reached, she added.

Several organisations are carrying out corporate campaigns to create a market pressure, in order to provoke a transition to a higher welfare system. She underlined that a new study published by the Commission demonstrated that compliance with animal welfare standards is not putting the EU producers at a competitive disadvantage.

At the political level, the Commission should be pushed to deliver the report mentioned in article 5 of the Broiler Directive, she argued. There could also be a request to EFSA for an updated report on the welfare of broiler chickens as well as a request for Commission guidance on the evolution of the welfare of broiler chickens, allowing for a new legislative proposal on the matter. She exhorted the Parliament to lead the changes at the political level.

Sirpa Pietikäinen (EPP, FI), President of the Intergroup, stated that, regarding the size of the production units, it appears to be growing. The President asked if there were studies on the conditions of the broilers compared to the stable size. She was contacted by Polish farmers that informed her of new investments in broiler productions units and asked the panellists for confirmation on that situation. She further asked if there were significant differences between Member States on the production habitats. She also asked how to help increase animal welfare with outbred broiler production.

Birthe Steenberg, Secretary General of the Association of Poultry Processors and Poultry Trade in the EU countries (AVEC), highlighted the importance of having a dialogue on the matter. The Secretary General recalled that, in December, a letter was sent to the Eurogroup, inviting them to present a speech at the AVEC's General Assembly, but no answer had been received yet. She explained that poultry production in Europe is growing, thanks to a growing demand, and that consumption has gone above the consumption of pork. Poultry meat is nutritious and healthy and there are no religious boundaries, but it should still be produced in a proper way. She drew attention to the fact that the EU has legislation on animal welfare, but that many exporting countries do not have animal welfare standards. The EU imported 90 thousand tonnes of poultry meat, last year, meaning that 25% of the breast meat consumed in the EU comes from third countries. She stressed that there is no control on the animal welfare standards from the imported meat and that, you might not find it on the supermarket, but when someone goes to a sandwich shop, they do not know where the meat comes from.

The Secretary General recognised that it is not the animal welfare standards that make the European meat less competitive, but it is still more expensive due to environmental, health and animal welfare standards. Concerning stunning, she explained that many European producers moved towards CO2 stunning, an improvement in animal welfare standards. Still, the issue with gas stunning is that it is irreversible, the birds die from the stunning, so it does not follow halal rules and makes it difficult to sell the Muslim communities. The industry is trying to improve the stunning situation with technical equipment.

As for new legislation on animal welfare in the EU, the Secretary General stated that the Commission is not willing to do that right now. Instead, the Commission has set up an Animal Welfare Platform

which is very useful to exchange ideas on the relevant issues. The President of AVEC is a member of the Platform. The industry is concerned and willing to have a dialogue, but it is also important to note that production complies with the EU's legislation on animal welfare, therefore the animal welfare is fine, she argued. If the consumer would like something more, they should not blame the producers for following the EU's legislation, since it is based on scientific guidelines, she further argued. The way forward is dialogue, she concluded.

Maria Noichl (S&D, DE) highlighted that nothing had been said about the use of medicines. The MEP stated that overuse of medication is one of the major problems in the mass poultry production. She asked if there was not already a ban on the use of unbalanced animals with huge breasts, adding that it constituted torture.

Prof. Harry Blokhuis, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU Department of Animal Environment and Health, responded that, concerning the size of the units, he was not aware of any particular studies. The experts stated that larger units can have better-trained people involved. He did not have information about the differences between Member States. The use of outside breeding is very limited, he added. As for CO₂ stunning, he explained that many slaughterhouses have moved towards it, but it is a very irritating gas. Since there is no live shackling, there is an improvement, but better stunning methods still need to be developed, he argued.

Francesca Porta, Programme Officer - Farm Animals, Eurogroup for Animals, stated that the production is going up because the consumption is going up. The panellist recalled that there is a European Strategy 2020 that suggests the reduction of the consumption of animal products, which is also defended by FAO. Therefore, the goal should be to produce less and better. She stressed that consumers cannot really choose what they eat because there is not a labelling system and there is a lack of transparency in the marketing. Concerning the EU's legislation, she recognised that there are third countries without animal welfare standards in place, but stated that animal welfare standards do not put European producers at a competitive disadvantage. There should be more rules for the imports to the EU, she added. As for the CO₂ stunning, it is an improvement, but it is not the ideal situation, she concluded.

Prof. Harry Blokhuis, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU Department of Animal Environment and Health responded that the use of antibiotics in Sweden is currently at 0%, but he did not know about the other Member States.

Francesca Porta, Programme Officer - Farm Animals, Eurogroup for Animals, stated that she would be happy to double check about the use of antibiotics and later inform Ms Noichl.

Birthe Steenberg, Secretary General of the Association of Poultry Processors and Poultry Trade in the EU countries (AVEC), stated that the use of antibiotics was extremely down in some Member States, while others are working on the matter. Germany had done a great work in the reduction, she added.

Sirpa Pietikäinen (EPP, FI), President of the Intergroup, clarified that in 2 or 3 Member States antibiotics are not used, but the other Member States use them in feed.

Anja Hazekamp (GUE/NGL, NL) argued that CO₂ stunning is a very cruel method since the animals literally choke to death. The MEP asked the panellists to talk more about slower growing bread and dual-purpose birds since there are also issues with the laying of eggs. She also asked Mr Blokhuis if he knew about a "Swedish method" that had been recently mentioned in the Dutch Parliament, according to which the animals were manually caught two at a time.

John Stuart Agnew (EFDD, UK) stated that there is an assumption that legislation in the EU will solve the problem, but he does not believe that is the case. The MEP exemplified that in the 40s, in the UK, there was great revulsion about the egg production with battery cages. Therefore, the free-range producers developed their own codes and it now represents about 55% of the market, driven by consumer demand. He argued that producers in Thailand and Brazil would be happy if the EU was legislating on the matter because they will not change their methods. The WTO does not allow blocking imports due to animal welfare standards, he explained, the importing country would have to prove animal health, human health or phytosanitary problems. The solution is to convince supermarkets to adhere to codes, he argued. Concerning the pictures of the lame birds, he stated that it represents a financial disaster for the supermarkets because those animals cannot eat or drink. The MEP questioned Mr Blokhuis comments about the importance of periods of darkness for the chickens' welfare since Sweden has days with constant sun.

Jørn Dohrmann (ECR, DK) asked for information about the best method to collect the animals. The MEP further asked about the use of new technology to achieve better welfare standards and about the setting of minimum standards in Europe. He also asked the panellists to provide their opinion on how to provide more information to the consumers, particularly the idea of country labelling or labelling of special products.

Karin Kadenbach (S&D, AT) underlined that 60% of chickens are affected by dermatitis. The MEP asked for information about the causes and consequences of dermatitis, besides the litter quality. She was glad to hear that the use of medication is decreasing, but added that the situation requires a better look in the future, since it might be specific to certain Member States.

Stefan Eck (GUE/NGL, DE) argued that one of the major problems stems from the fact that broiler chickens must grow and gain weight so rapidly. The MEP drew attention to the importance of studying and speaking about breeding deformities. The production must move away from hybrid chickens, because they suffer so much, he stated. Labelling is necessary, so that consumers know the place of origin, he further argued. He "complimented" Ms Steenberg for being able to say so many untruths in such a short time. He questioned her affirmation that chicken meat is healthy, since it involves terrible suffering and high quantities of medication.

Prof. Harry Blokhuis, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU Department of Animal Environment and Health, stated that there are already slow-growing breeds and exemplified that, in the Netherlands, it already represents 30% of the market, due to consumer demand and an agreement with the supermarkets. The exporter stressed the importance of consumer demand. Concerning the periods with constant sunlight in Sweden, he responded that windows can be closed, so it is not an issue. There is currently research being done to divide the continuous light into periods of darkness, he added. Regarding loading the animals, he clarified that there is no recent research on the comparison, but that stress in animals loaded by machine. Nevertheless, the loading can still be done wrong under both methods, since the machine must be operated in a professional way. As far as he knows, concerning the "Swedish method", most loading is done by machine. On labelling, he mentioned that there is work being done on animal welfare protocols that can be used for labelling.

Francesca Porta, Programme Officer - Farm Animals, Eurogroup for Animals, argued that production should move towards slow breeding animals and that there is already expertise on the practice. The expert recognised that good legislation is not enough, that is why corporate campaigns are taking place. Nevertheless, the European directive should be comprehensive, she added. Labelling is essential and that is why the Commission should be pushed to produce the previously mentioned report, she further argued.