



Briefing | EP Intergroup on the Welfare and Conservation of Animals - The Welfare of Broilers



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On October 25, European Parliament's Intergroup on the Welfare and Conservation of Animals convened to discuss the welfare of broilers.

John Flack (ECR, UK), Vice-President of the Intergroup, drew attention to an amendment tabled to the AGRI Committee's report on unfair trading practices in business-to-business relationships in the food supply chain, which would prevent retailers from agreeing on animal welfare standards higher than the legal norm. The Vice-President urged his colleagues to co-sign a collective written question on force feeding. Plus, he urged his colleagues to vote in favour of the motions for resolutions on animal welfare, antimicrobial use and the environmental impact of industrial broiler farming.

Karin Kadenbach (S&D, AT) provided an overview of the previously mentioned motions for resolutions. Several MEPs expressed support for the motions but drew attention to the problems raised by free trade agreements on the issue of animal welfare and the potential impact to European farmers. Afterwards, a Policy Adviser for the "Beter Leven" label provided an overview of the label and of its achievements in the Netherlands. A poultry industry representative underlined the importance of market segmentation and of having the same rules applied to imported food.

Please see below a summary of the meeting.

John Flack (ECR, UK), Vice-President of the Intergroup, drew attention to the commotion raised by an amendment tabled by German EPP MEPs to the report on unfair trading practices in business-to-business relationships in the food supply chain drafted by the AGRI Committee, which would prevent retailers from agreeing on animal welfare standards higher than the legal norm. The Vice-President argued that this moved caused general consternation in several sectors and aims to block one of the most positive policy developments in recent years.

Mr Flack highlighted that, even though the mentioned amendment is likely to fall in triologue negotiations, the German EPP MEPs are still trying to push the amendment through. The Vice-President stressed that the Plenary's vote, taking place later that day, will be an opportunity to challenge the mandate, in order to allow a vote on the issue in the November Plenary meeting.

The MEP informed that he will be voting that way and urged other members of the Intergroup to do the same. He added that he was personally horrified when he read the amendment.

Mr Flack also urged his colleagues to co-sign a collective written question on force feeding in foie gras production, which already has the support of 80 MEPs. The question was prepared by Sirpa Pietikäinen (EPP, FI) and other members of the Intergroup. The written question is open to signatures until the end of the present week. The Vice-President further urged the members of the Intergroup to encourage MEPs in the different political families to co-sign.

Concerning the Plenary's vote on the motions for resolutions on animal welfare, antimicrobial use and the environmental impact of industrial broiler farming, Mr Flack informed that he would be voting against his party whip, because he will be voting in favour of several important amendments on animal welfare.

[A video related to the mentioned motion for resolution was shown]

The environmental and public health impact of industrial broiler farming

Karin Kadenbach (S&D, AT) underscored that the motion for resolution expresses strong support for animal welfare, but also for public health and the competitiveness of the poultry industry sector. As rapporteur on the One Health approach, Ms Kadenbach expressed her satisfaction with the discussion on veterinary medicine products, because there is a strong position for better medicine for animals, since they have a right to be kept in good conditions. The need for antibiotics should be dramatically reduced, she added.

Ms Kadenbach explained that, after intense negotiations, the motion for resolution has the support of almost all the political families, so she is looking forward for the success of the motion. The MEP stressed that it is not a resolution against the industry, but a resolution with the industry, which they aim to help. The resolution can make the European Commission take the next steps to help the industry. The motion calls on the Commission to look into specific and problematic issues in the predominant method of processing. There is a duty to respond to the consumers' demand for more transparency and higher animal welfare standards in food production. The demands go in the direction of safeguarding better public health. As described by the One Health approach, there should be no silos between animal health, human health, and the environment. A sick animal might cause sick people or damage the environment, she exemplified.

Ms Kadenbach highlighted a key element of the motion: the call for more transparency, asking the Commission to introduce labelling on protection. The motion calls for better public health protection, asks EFSA to investigate AMR risk factors in poultry production, asks for higher animal welfare standards and more humane farming sectors. The motion also asks the Commission to ensure the full enforcement of current legislation, to enhance AMR research and best practices, plus to ensure fair trading practices. There are 7 billion chickens in the EU and 90% are kept under intensive industrial conditions, but this could be done differently, she argued.

Ms Kadenbach drew attention to a report from last year, which demonstrated the externalised costs for the environment due to ammonia and other emissions. There is an impact for the health of people living in the EU, which contributes to the surging of AMR. The report published by EFSA and the ECDC, this year, showed that AMR in certain microorganisms in poultry meat

is increasing, despite efforts of the industry to reduce the use of antibiotics. There are concrete risks for the general public. The use of antibiotics is decreasing, thanks to better biosecurity and management practices, but not at the same rate in the Member States.

Ms Kadenbach argued that a major step forward can only be achieved if animal welfare is substantially improved. The motion includes a call to promote different broiler breeds that require less antibiotics treatments. It also calls for stricter implementation of existing rules on animal welfare by measuring the results with animal-based indicators, which have already been developed by scientists. The MEP stated that the future might be meatless for some or more focused on clean meat, but, in the meanwhile, they must address the concerns of the EU citizens to improve the situation of millions of animals. She underscored that the motion should be supported by the overwhelming majority of the house and expressed her hope that there will be support for the amendments as well.

Thomas Waitz (Greens/EFA, DE) argued that imported products into the EU need to meet the very same standards. Otherwise, EU farmers are put in a very difficult situation.

John Stewart Agnew (EFDD, UK) agreed with Mr Waitz's comment. The industry is very competitive. When the chickens grow fast, the chances of business success for the farmer are higher. If the EU imposes such stringent conditions, EU farmers will not be able to sell competitively against farmers from Thailand and other countries. There will be an export of the industry.

Mr Agnew argued that, if the previously mentioned video was reflective of the entire unit, it would not be possible to make a profit or to achieve a proper growth rate. The operator would put themselves out of business. The MEP stated that he was still waiting for the Intergroup to define "industrial farming", particularly the number of birds in the farm, since it is very easy to talk on emotional terms, but very difficult to actually provide a definition.

John Flack (ECR, UK), Vice-President of the Intergroup, responded that some common sense was needed on the matter. When an entire chicken is bought, in the UK, at the supermarket for 3£, it is obvious that the animal must have had a horrible life. If TESCO, in the UK, is selling the chicken by 3£, by the time they take their huge cut, plus the cut for transporters and others, very little money is given to the farmer. If the farmers were paid more, they could provide better standards. The Vice-President stated that he did not believe that farmers are cruel or want to harm their animals. It is necessary to educate the public to get away from the "mania of cheap food". Farmers should have more money to treat their animals better. The MEP drew attention to a book he authored on the described issue.

Jytte Guteland (S&D, ES) emphasised that there are farmers who deliver good conditions and who really stand for animal welfare and high-quality production for the consumers. The MEP argued that one should be put in a situation of desperation and where the low cost culture pressures the industry. The desperation makes people that actions that would not be otherwise normal. She stated that she would not image the desperation that forces farmers to ignore the situation. Even it is difficult, the Parliament must fight for a level playing field and make the European Commission deliver. She also thanked Ms Kadenbach for her work.

Pascal Durand (Greens/EFA, FR) argued that the free trade system does not have animal welfare standards in the name of competitiveness. All actors in the system are against asking for environmental criteria. They do not want production manufacturing standards, nor animal

welfare or animal health standards, because it affects competitiveness in trade. The MEP argued that, in the current situation, prices do not actually go down, but the quality does. He drew attention to the situation in France where the higher rate of suicides is among farmers.

Mr Durand stressed that, in negotiations of free trade agreements, they must ask for strong environmental standards. The MEP expressed satisfaction with Ms Kadenbach's text. If they do not insist in their model, nothing will change which will be disastrous for consumers, farmers, and animal welfare. They must defend their model and be willing to take certain risks. If just competitiveness continues to be followed, the consumers themselves will be destroyed.

Stefan Eck (GUE/NGL, DE) argued that, unless there are clear provisions in free trade agreements demanding the same standards, the situation will be very difficult. The MEP stressed that there is a lack of political will in Germany. He drew attention to the homepage of the German public health organisation, which includes an explanation on how to prepare chicken. The explanation tells people to use rubber gloves and to disinfect the kitchen at the end, as if it was normal to consume contaminated chicken. Germany has a great impact in the EU and could have an impact on this matter, but an interest to work for public health does not appear to exist, he concluded.

Klaus Buchner (Greens/EFA, DE) argued that free trade agreements, particularly CETA, must include clauses addressing environmental protection and animal welfare, plus their enforcement with penalties. The MEP stated that the amendments tabled call for enforcement under criminal law, so he urged his colleagues to support the amendments.

Anja Hazekamp (GUE/NGL, NL) expressed her support for Ms Kadenbach's call. The motion does not only help farmers against unfair trading practices, but also helps the environment, it helps in the fight against AMR, and helps the animal. The resolution is beneficial to everyone. The MEP argued that it is also important to mention fires in stables, since this is a problem in the Netherlands related to fires in stables, which have been increasing. Therefore, she expressed her satisfaction that the problem is mentioned in the resolution.

Ms Hazekamp highlighted that there are huge imports from Thailand, Brazil, and Ukraine. When the association agreement with Ukraine was being negotiated, they warned about the consequences and now there is a huge influx of chicken products from Ukraine. One of the biggest Ukrainian chicken farms has opened a processing factory in the Netherlands, in order to sell their meat as European. The MEP also informed that she would be supporting all resolutions and urged her colleagues to support amendments 1 to 4.

John Stewart Agnew (EFDD, UK) argued that the change must start with consumers, like it happened with free range eggs. Consumers pressured the supermarkets and the supermarkets then had a template for production for the farmers. It is necessary to define "factory farm", so that the supermarket can take action and act with the farmers. It is necessary to have the retailers on board, he emphasised.

Francesca Porta, Farm Animals Programme Officer, Eurogroup for Animals, underlined the importance of having poultry meat labelling. Regarding free range eggs, she stated that there are other systems that can provide higher welfare. There is no need for a dichotomy between free range and intensive. There can be, for example, indoor production with access to the outside.

John Flack (ECR, UK), Vice-President of the Intergroup, stated that it is not necessary the size of the unit that makes a difference. As for leaving the situation to consumers, the Vice-President highlighted that, many years ago, in the UK, consumers wanted children to clean their chimneys. Still, compassionate and sensitive leaders said no and legislated against. Sometimes, legislators must be willing to take the lead. It cannot always be left to consumer demand, he emphasised.

The "Beter Leven" label, a success story

Anke Sitter, Policy Adviser for Beter Leven, stated that she sees the "Beter Leven" label as a success story. The label has been working with the Dutch society for the protection of animals, has a background of veterinary and economy, and has eleven years of experience. The label was introduced in the market and trust has been built on it, being now the most well-known label by consumers in the Netherlands. A key for success was their choice to increase animal welfare in recognisable and feasible steps. In 2017, 31 million animals had better living conditions thanks to the label, of which 26 million were broiler chickens.

Ms Sitter explained that participants in the label create a higher income of about 10%, meaning that they have more opportunities to invest in welfare and sustainability. Producers and consumers find that a 5% to 25% higher cost is acceptable. Legislation is not enough and the label sets standards above the legal requirements, having an effect on sustainability. The only way to have a successful label in the market was with a partnership with producers and retailers as well as with independence assurance. Together, they have worked on building consumer awareness. The requirements, even at the lowest level of the three levels system, address animal welfare issues, impact on animal health and the environment, plus human health.

Ms Sitter further explained that the label requires slower stock intensive breeding, healthier chickens, less use of antibiotics, and more normal behaviour as well as slower growing breeds. It also involves stronger chicken and new hatching methods. It is not yet required, but there are possibilities for further reduction on the use of medication. There are requirements for more space for roaming, and more daylight and freshwater. The results are supported by the official Dutch authority on antibiotic use control, which mentions that lower growing rates translate into less use of antibiotics, as required by the label. The figures show that slowing growing breeds and lower stock density leads to much lower use of antibiotics. Alternative farmers use less antibiotics than traditional farms. According to some claims, 97% of the "Better Leuven" broilers are free of antibiotics.

Ms Sitter recognised that the rate of participation in the label has flattened due to 70% of Dutch production being for export. To reach those farmers, acceptance of the label across borders becomes important. When it is recognised across borders, farmers can recover their investments. International cooperation is important. They are doing an international project with Germany for mutual recognition of labels and harmonisation.

Ms Sitter highlighted that they are trying to work on a holistic approach on sustainability with a specific focus on animal welfare. Animal welfare-based housing design leads to more sustainable stables. The Policy Adviser provided examples of stables without forced ventilation and of a laying eggs farm with different sustainable methods.

Concerning their research agenda, they are working on further development of slaughter methods and transport methods. Plus, they are looking for support for biodiversity and other

spaces in the stables. They do not have all the answers yet, but they are working on sharing their knowledge, she concluded.

[A video related to the label was shown]

Paul Lopez, AVEC President, argued that it is important to emphasise that consumers must have a choice. More segmentation of concept markets is needed. The market share of the production model described by Ms Sitter is between 5 and 7% in the Netherlands. Half of the poultry production in the Netherlands is conventional. There are also rules to be followed.

Concerning imports, 25% of the chicken breast eaten in the EU comes from third countries. Equivalent requirements do not mean anything. The same rules must be implemented when importing food. As for the size of farms, the scales are becoming completely different. He highlighted that, recently, a non-EU company announced an investment of hundreds of millions of dollars in the EU on a site to breed and process one million chickens in the same place.

Klaus Buchner (Greens/EFA, DE) highlighted that, in Germany, they are trying to introduce a similar label.

John Stewart Agnew (EFDD, UK) highlighted that the "Beter Leven" provides a template and some definitions. They must get retailers to participate in the label, he added.

Anja Hazekamp (GUE/NGL, NL) expressed her satisfaction with the words of the European poultry sector, because they are accepting important parts of the resolution, particularly on the label for consumer choices and on imports from third countries.

Dominique Bilde (ENF, FR) explained that, for political reasons, she did not sign the motion, but she does agree with it. The MEP highlighted that she has been struggling to draw attention animal welfare issues. When voting on free trade agreement, no one is discussing that situation, she concluded.