

Citizen's summary

Revising EU legislation on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes

What is the problem?

EU legislation on the protection of animals used for experimental and other scientific purposes has been in force since 1986. The aim of the legislation was to harmonise animal experiment practices in the European Union. In the more than twenty years since the adoption of this legislation some Member States have passed laws which have led to a widening gap in standards in Europe. The Commission felt that it was time that this divergence be rectified and that further improvements could be made to the welfare of animals used in scientific procedures.

In revising this piece of legislation the Commission conducted an assessment of the socio-economic impact and effect on animal welfare this proposal would have.

What are the benefits of the proposal?

The Commission's proposal will considerably improve the welfare of some 12 million animals which are used in scientific procedures in the European Union each year, reduce to the absolute minimum necessary the number of animals used, ensure fair competition for industry and research, and should also boost the development and validation of alternative methods to replace, reduce and refine the use of experimental animals.

The Commission believes strongly in the need to find alternative methods to testing on animals. Where this is not possible, the number of animals used must be reduced or the testing methods refined so as to cause less harm to the animals. The proposal also introduces a ban on the use of great apes in scientific procedures (chimpanzees, bonobos gorillas and orangutans). Only when survival of the species itself is at stake, or in the case of an unexpected outbreak of a life-threatening or debilitating disease, can a Member State exceptionally be granted permission for their use.

Why is action taken at EU level?

Action at EU level is important because EU legislation can improve animal welfare in all 27 Member States and reduce the differences in regulatory requirements for industry and researchers. Improving the situation for as many experimental animals as possible and rectifying the imbalance between all EU Member States can only be achieved if legislation is adopted at EU level.

When will this proposal take effect?

The Commission's proposal has been forwarded to the European Parliament and the Council and will follow what is called the "co-decision" procedure where both Parliament and Council must agree on the final content of the text. The whole process may take more than 18 months. An additional 18 months transition period may be given to Member States to update their national legislation and comply with the new provisions. The Commission hopes its proposal will be adopted promptly so that the benefits of the proposal can be achieved as soon as possible.