

Animal welfare labelling: Commission report launches in-depth political debate

The European Commission adopted today a report in which it outlines a series of options for animal welfare labelling, to facilitate an in-depth political debate with the other institutions. The overall goal of policy in this area is to make it easier for consumers to identify and choose welfare-friendly products, and thereby give an economic incentive to producers to improve the welfare of animals. The report also presents options for the possible establishment of a European Network of Reference Centres for the protection and welfare of animals. Such a network, modelled on the existing Community Reference Laboratories for animal health, could provide technical support for the development and implementation of animal welfare policies, including regarding certification and labelling. The document, based on an external study and a broad stakeholder consultation, is the Commission's response to the conclusions of the May 2007 Agriculture Council which called for a report that would allow an in-depth debate on animal welfare labelling. Although the report does not endorse any of the options outlined, it identifies those which are considered to be the most feasible today. Harmonised requirements for voluntary animal welfare claims, for example, constitute one such option to support transparent information to consumers. Another is a voluntary Community Animal Welfare Label open for all to use, provided they meet the criteria.

EU Health Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou said: "If successfully communicated, higher animal welfare standards offer the prospect of a win-win situation for both consumers and producers. Consumers looking for welfare-friendly products can more easily identify them, and producers applying higher standards can market their products more effectively. This important report provides valuable food for thought on the possible ways forward on animal welfare labelling. It assesses concrete options to provide better and clearer information on animal welfare, and explores appropriate ways to strengthen scientific cooperation on animal welfare in Europe."

Current shortcomings

A feasibility study carried out for the purposes of the report indicated that the lack of animal welfare information on food products is an important issue for the consumer. While voluntary welfare labelling schemes exist, there is no harmonised system of animal welfare standards for labelling purposes and consumers are unable to understand and differentiate the welfare standards promoted under these schemes.

A knock-on effect of this is that very few products provide information to the consumer on welfare standards and there is very little motivation for more producers to improve animal welfare and market their products accordingly.

Labelling options

Following the feasibility study and a comprehensive stakeholder consultation, the Commission explored policy options to address these shortcomings. It arrived at a series of options to be considered in the upcoming discussion.

These options include the establishment of requirements for the voluntary use of animal welfare claims, the establishment of a voluntary Community Animal Welfare Label open for all to use, provided they meet the criteria, and the drafting of guidelines for animal welfare labelling and quality schemes.

Other policy options cover the labelling of welfare standards for farm animals for food production, the labelling of the farming system used for food production and the labelling of compliance with EU minimum standards or equivalents.

European Network of Reference Centres

Many stakeholders have raised concerns about the need for improved coordination and use of existing scientific expertise, better to serve policy-making on animal welfare. These concerns led the Commission to assess the feasibility of different options for establishing a European Network of Reference Centres for the protection and welfare of animals. This could provide technical support for the development and implementation of animal welfare policies, including regarding certification and labelling.

The preferred is to designate an existing centre of excellence on animal welfare to cooperate with a network of relevant research institutions in the Member States, all recognised by the Community. This is a well-tried method in the animal health field, where Community Reference Laboratories coordinate networks of national reference laboratories and receive an annual grant to perform designated tasks for the EU. The debate will take advantage of the experience gained over the past five years by the development of the Welfare Quality research project.

Background

In May 2007, the Council of Ministers adopted Conclusions on Animal Welfare Labelling inviting the Commission to present a report that would allow an in-depth debate on the issue. In December 2007, the Commission launched a feasibility study discussing with stakeholders animal welfare labelling in order to prepare the current report. This was concluded in January 2009. The findings of the report will form the basis for the further discussion of this issue between the Commission, the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

For more information, see:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/welfare/index_en.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/welfare/farm/labelling_en.htm