

Working group of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health



Conclusions of the Workshop on the castration of piglets

"Reflections towards alternatives"

Brussels, 29 January 2007

There is today substantial information on the scientific aspects of the subject. In particular the European Food Safety Authority has presented in 2004 an extensive scientific opinion on the subject. It indicates possible alternatives to castration without anaesthesia that have been more specifically described during this workshop such as the use of anaesthesia, better genetic selection, immunocastration and the detection of boar taint at the slaughterline.

It has been concluded that castration without anaesthesia is painful and that alternatives need to be considered from their welfare advantages and disadvantages as well as a number of other aspects such as the level of acceptance by the consumer, food safety, the practicality of the technique or their economic impact.

It was also agreed that further scientific research on the subject need to be continued.

In Europe the castration of piglets is a practice resulting from consumer demand for meat free from boar taint and this demand varies between countries and depending on the habits in consuming pig meat. Limiting the suffering of animals generated by castration is a demand from certain consumers that are however, at the same time, not able to accept boar taint.

Without consumer demand there is limited interest in performing castration under normal farming conditions. The castration of piglets requires additional handling of the animals, it increases the risk for infections and it decreases the growth rate and the food conversion ratio.

The result of the workshop confirms that some producers in different Member States already do not practice the castration of piglets. There are also alternatives such as the use of immunocastration that has been implemented with success in some third countries.

Due to market demands for heavy pigs used for example for the production of cured hams, banning castration without alternatives is likely to seriously affect the pig meat market in the EU. Castration also facilitates the mixing of males and females pigs and decrease fighting.

There is need for a wider acceptance of alternatives to piglets' castration by stakeholders. Promotion of such alternatives should be encouraged through better information to the consumer. It is recognized that investments have to be foreseen in order to make those alternatives available for producers under commercial conditions.

Pig meat processing and consumption in Europe is strongly linked to regional traditions and cultural identities. Any measure that would affect these aspects should therefore be carefully assessed from the social and cultural aspects as to ensure that those traditions and identities are fully respected.

As the castration of piglets affects the market of EU pig meat, it would be preferable to be dealt at Community level taking into account the scientific, social and economic aspects.

The participants to the workshop agreed on the need to:

- 1) develop an European wide information tool to keep stakeholders informed on the issue and its evolution (see http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/welfare/index_en.htm);
- 2) organise in the future a seminar on this question widely open to all stakeholders¹;
- 3) realise a feasibility study on the social, economic, environmental and animal welfare consequences of the phasing out of the castration of piglets taking into account the current alternatives.

¹ Possibly organised in November 2007 in the framework of the PIGCAS project.