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Speech to the Animal Welfare Intergroup of the European Parliament

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Animal Welfare Intergroup of the European Parliament

Brussels, 8 June 2005

Chairman, Honourable Members,

I am very pleased to be here to address the Animal Welfare Intergroup, and to discuss with you, in particular, the various welfare-related initiatives of the Commission.

I should say at the outset that I, like millions of other European citizens, share the view that animal welfare is an issue of very high importance. Indeed, this is a priority area for me as Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection. And I would add that this is an area in which Europe can reach out and connect with its citizens.

Making progress in the field of animal welfare calls for cooperation rather than confrontation. I know that your expectations are high – and I look forward to working with you constructively to achieve a comprehensive and effective animal welfare policy.

Eurobarometer survey

First, and as I announced earlier today, I have the pleasure to present to you the results of an EU-wide survey on consumer attitudes to the welfare of farmed animals – which demonstrates that consumers across the European Union take a very strong interest in this topic.

The survey was based on interviews with around 25000 citizens in the 25 Member States, in February and March of this year.

The results show that European consumers clearly care about animal welfare and want to make informed purchasing choices. However, they feel that this is not always possible due to the absence of information on whether final products have been based on animal welfare and the general lack of clear food labelling clearing this respect.

Nevertheless, consumers feel confident that they are able to contribute to the improvement of animal welfare standards by purchasing animal welfare-friendly products. 74% of citizens asked clearly expressed the view that their choice could result in better animal welfare.

A concrete example is that 57% of consumers stated that they would be willing to pay an additional price premium for eggs sourced from more welfare-friendly production systems.

Overall, consumers appear to believe strongly in EU animal protection standards. Only 8% thought that EU standards were worse than in other parts of the world.

Action plan on animal welfare

We have to capitalise on this. This is why the results of the survey will be highly relevant to the future Community initiatives in this field, and in particular for the elaboration of the Community action plan on animal welfare that I plan to present to the Council and to the European Parliament before the end of this year.

The potential benefits that could stem from the adoption of a long term European action plan on animal welfare are manifold. From ensuring a consistent approach across the various policy areas of the Community dealing with animals and animal products, to showing a clear European direction on the issue to our trading partners.

Allow me now to turn to some of the Commission's current welfare-related initiatives.

BROILERS

Last week, the Commission adopted a proposal for a Directive on the protection of chickens kept for meat production.

Chickens raised for meat production are among the most intensively farmed of all animal species. Our proposal responds to strong demands for Community action to improve the welfare of these animals.

As part of the preparation of this proposal, the Commission requested an opinion from the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Welfare. This opinion identified important housing and husbandry problems, which need to be addressed.

The Commission consulted widely on this issue with stakeholders since 2001. Valuable data has also been provided by the European poultry industry.

The proposal aims to introduce animal welfare improvements by means of technical and management requirements for establishments – for example by setting maximum stocking densities and conditions regarding litter quality and lighting.

The proposal also provides for enhanced monitoring on poultry farms to check compliance with animal welfare standards. The flow of related information will also be improved between the producer, the competent authorities and the slaughterhouse. This will incorporate a welfare specific monitoring of flocks after slaughter.

In cases where problems are found, the competent authorities will be mandated to ensure that corrective action is taken.

The proposed new standards for farming chickens will probably be the highest in the world. Clearly the implementation of these measures will have an effect on production costs, and this aspect will also need to be taken into account.

I should recall at this point that global trade in poultry meat is increasing. Imports into the EU increased from 280 million tonnes in 2000 to 480 million tonnes in 2003. Imports from South American countries in the last two years have risen significantly.

I believe that the Community has a duty and a responsibility to press for the recognition of animal welfare standards in the international context.

In relation to the proposed Directive, the Commission will submit to the Parliament and the Council a report on the possible introduction of a specific harmonised mandatory labelling regime to indicate poultry meat and derived products as being of EU origin, and thus complying with relevant animal welfare standards.

World animal health org. (OIE)

Continuing with international issues, I would like to take this opportunity to inform this Intergroup of the approval, at the last General Session of the World Animal Health Organisation, of the very first international animal welfare initiatives.

The adoption of such a decision by the 167 members of the World Animal Health Organisation represents a landmark achievement for the promotion of animal welfare.

The Commission was one of the major supporters of the OIE's initiative, and looks forward to the development and promotion of further international animal welfare measures.

I will now turn to our work in two specific areas on which the European Parliament has shown particular concern: the protection of animals during transport; and the possible ban on the trade in cat and dog fur.

Animal transport

The Regulation on the protection of animals during transport was the first major issue with which I was confronted during my first days in office.

The adoption of the transport Regulation by the Council in December 2004 opened the door to further developments.

This summer, the Commission plans to adopt a proposal to set temperature standards for long journeys – an obligation that derives from the new Regulation.

And you will recall that satellite navigation systems to monitor long journeys are the cornerstone of the new Regulation.

To enable efficient enforcement, an information technology programme on the implementation of navigation systems for long distance road transport is currently being studied by the Commission.

Standards for the transport of poultry were not covered by the new Regulation on animal transport, due to the lack of scientific data at that time. However, an opinion of the European Food Safety Authority on the transport of poultry, fish and other species will soon provide recommendations as to where the current legislation needs to be upgraded.

Concerning the revision of travelling times and stocking densities, the Commission will continue to be vigilant and will monitor closely the situation in the Member States.

I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the statement that I have already made before the European Parliament that I intend to re-visit this issue before the end of my mandate. I am particularly interested in pursuing a legislative initiative that will further improve the transport conditions for animals.

Cat and dog fur

Finally we come to the sensitive issue of trade in cat and dog fur from Third Countries.

Since I took office, I have received a massive number of letters on this emotive subject, from politicians as well as from citizens, expressing deep indignation and repulsion regarding this trade. These feelings were provoked by horror scenes of how cats and dogs exploited for fur production, are treated in Asia.

I share this feeling. All cases of mistreatment of animals are unacceptable and I can assure you of the Commission's desire and determination to contribute to animal welfare, and my own personal commitment in this respect.

This is also a matter of protection of consumers, who are often unaware that the products they purchase may have been manufactured from pet fur, since there is no relevant labelling.

This issue was discussed at the Agriculture Council last week. I made it clear before the Ministers that the political will to take action on this matter is there. Such action could consist in a ban on the trade of cat and dog fur or a Community labelling scheme, or a combination of both of these possibilities.

The issue is, of course, legally complex because of its trade implications as well as the absence of measures banning this trade in the majority of Member States. Still, I am currently examining how to best overcome these difficulties for the Commission to be able to propose an effective measure.

- a ban on the trade of furs derived from mistreated animals and in particular from cats and dogs treated in such a cruel manner, and/or
- as a last resort, proposing a Community labelling scheme for furs dealing with consumer concerns.

Clearly our priority and first option will be the introduction of the ban.

But this is not an issue that the Community can advance in isolation. In addition to answering the legal questions on how to proceed with this, we need more information. Here, the Member States need to play a key role.

Member States asking for a ban on trade or import at Community level need to support the Commission. They need to inform us about the ongoing trade and import of such fur from Third Countries and about ongoing research that will allow us to distinguish fur from cat and dog from other furs.

Any information concerning new analytical methods will be vital for the Commission in its endeavour towards devising an effective way of stopping this trade.

Furthermore, it would also help if those Member States that have already adopted legislation in this area were to inform the Commission of their practical experience and of any information as regards implementation.

Indeed this very point is today being discussed by experts from Member States in the Standing Committee of the Food Chain and Animal Health in Brussels.

To conclude, I would like to point out that all the initiatives I have mentioned today demand coherence within and between policies, proper planning and strategic formulation.

The Commission has, and will continue to, devote much attention and energy to the complex issue of animal welfare. I am grateful for the broad support of this Intergroup which has certainly contributed to the progress we have made so far – and I hope very much that our constructive dialogue will continue into the future.

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