

Brussels, 5 February 2008

Calls to stop the use of animals in shellfish testing

Eurogroup for Animals is calling for an immediate ban on animals being used to test shellfish for human consumption, after a scientific panel ruled it was a poor way of spotting potentially lethal toxins.

The panel from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) analysed the different methods to detect toxins in shellfish at the request of the European Commission, and concluded using animals was a flawed method of uncovering the harmful substances. As a result EFSA is recommending the European Union to use alternative, animal-friendly tests instead.

Although tests using mice and rats are currently the official method to check batches of shellfish for possible poisoning, several countries have been using alternative tests successfully for years. The use of reliable animal-friendly tests is obligatory when available under directive 86/609/EEC, the animal experimentation directive.

Leading animal welfare organisation Eurogroup has now written to Markos Kyprianou, Commissioner for Health at the European Commission, to call for an immediate end to the ineffectual tests that kill animals needlessly.

Sonja Van Tichelen, director of Eurogroup, commented: "What is the point of causing the deaths of all these animals, if these tests cannot even reliably detect the existence of these toxins?"

"Countries such as Germany have been using alternative tests with great effect for years now. These animal-friendly tests are better for animals *and* humans alike."

Tests are used to check shellfish such as mussels and oysters for possible unsafe levels of OA-group toxins. The science panel of EFSA said tests using mice and rats had "shortcomings" which made them "inappropriate" for establishing safe levels. It found these tests have a limited capability for finding these harmful toxins. Alternative biomolecular and chemical methods which do not require the use of animals have more potential to accurately assess these limits.

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Notes:

- Eurogroup for Animals represents animal welfare organisations in nearly each of the European member states. Since it was launched in 1980, the organisation has succeeded in encouraging the European Union to adopt higher legal standards of animal protection.
- Okadaic Acid (usually shortened to OA) group toxins are produced by a type of plankton. They are not toxic to shellfish, but can cause various diseases in humans from diarrhoea to potentially even deadly paralytic diseases.
- Using mice to test for these toxins is greatly distressing to the animals, and inevitably leads to their deaths. These tests regularly produce false negative and false positive results. If two out of three mice die, the shellfish are banned from the market. But if only one mouse dies the shellfish are still considered safe under EU legislation and allowed to be sold.
- Tests such as chemical assays and biological test methods do not require the use of animals. They have been found to be highly reliable, sensitive and reproducible.
- Under Council Directive 86/609/EEC member states are allowed to shun animal tests when “another scientifically satisfactory method of obtaining the result sought and not entailing the use of live animals is reasonably and practicably available”.
- For more information about Eurogroup, visit www.eurogroupforanimals.org.