

Analysis of new mandates received by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)

The EFSA is mandated to produce five new opinions on the welfare of farmed animals on farm and during transport

In the framework of the European (EU) Farm-to-Fork Strategy, the EU Commission announced the revision of the Transport and the Slaughter Regulation (respectively, Council Regulation 1/2005 and Council Regulation 1099/2009).

As a part of this revision process a fitness check on these two Regulations will be carried out. Additionally, other animal welfare legislation will be evaluated, namely the General Farm Directive (Council Directive 98/58/EC), and the Directives laying down minimum standards for the protection of laying hens (Council Directive 1999/74/EC), broiler chickens (Council Directive 2007/43/EC), calves (Council Directive 2008/119/EC), and pigs (Council Directive 2008/120/EC). All these Directives still allow for the use of certain kinds of cages, practices that the EU citizens have urged the EU Commission to ban by signing [“End The Cage Age”](#); a European Citizens Initiative (ECI) supported by 173 NGOs across the EU, that successfully concluded in 2019.

To make sure that the animal welfare legislation in place is scientifically relevant, as well as to guide the expected, and potential, revision processes, the EU Commission asked the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to carry out five scientific assessments. Particularly, the mandates sent to the EFSA asked for an assessment of the welfare of pigs, calves, broiler chickens and laying hens. For all these animals the EU Commission listed the categories of interest¹, and requested the EFSA to identify the animal welfare consequences, relevant Animal-Based Measures (ABMs), and the main hazards at the origin of such consequences. Additionally, a fifth opinion will look at the welfare of several farmed animals species during transport.

The following analysis is based on the Terms of References (ToRs) published by the EFSA on its portal.

EFSA’s new mandates on poultry, pig, and calf welfare

According to EU statistics, poultry is one of the most farmed species across the EU. The EFSA in the past years, already produced several opinions on poultry, especially on their welfare at slaughter. Now the EFSA has been mandated to produce two new opinions on the welfare of broiler chickens and laying hens.

Currently, there is a lively debate around the use of cages in egg production and the welfare implications for laying hens: despite the market share of eggs coming from birds raised in alternative systems is expanding, [about 50% of the hens in the EU are still kept in cages](#) (furnished cages). The EFSA is requested by the EU Commission to assess the “welfare of laying hens and the risks associated with alternative systems (organic, free range and barn) compared to the cage system currently allowed”, and the “welfare of hens in furnished cages, and risks associated with rearing of animals non beak trimmed”.

The EU Authority will look at the whole production cycle (from breeding to the laying phase), being the slaughter and on-farm killing already covered by [other opinions](#). The same approach will be followed for the scientific opinion on the welfare of broiler chickens: the EFSA will assess the welfare of these birds during the whole production cycle, from the keeping of day-old chicks (up to 72 hours of age) until the rearing phase. Upon request by the EU Commission, the EFSA will assess the welfare

¹ This list can be expanded by the EFSA.

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of the breeders, and the risks associated with (i) housing them in (individual) cages, (ii) the practice of routine mutilation (such as beak trimming) and (iii) the feed restriction.

The request coming from the EU Commission to assess the welfare of animal categories currently not covered by the EU law (i.e. chicks, pullets, and breeders) shows the willingness of the EU to consider making the relevant Directives more comprehensive and extend the legal protection to animals that have been forgotten, so far.

In a third opinion, the EFSA will look into the welfare of pigs, assessing the welfare of: gilts and dry pregnant sows before farrowing, farrowing sows and piglets (from birth to weaning), weaners, rearing pigs (10 weeks of age to slaughter or service) and boars.

Since the Pig Directive doesn't exclude the use of crates for gilts and sows (Annex Chapter II, B) the EU Commission mandated the EFSA to explore scientific information regarding risks and benefits of possible alternative housing systems to the ones presently allowed, or of further increasing the period of time during which gilts and sows must be kept in groups. Individual pens are still allowed also for boars (Annex I, Chapter II), but their welfare remains forgotten and not addressed in this scientific opinion.

The EFSA also received a request for an opinion on the welfare of calves. Council Directive 2008/119/EC requires calves to be kept in groups after the age of eight weeks. The EFSA will explore scientific information that supports the feasibility of further increasing the period of time during which these animals can be kept in groups in a way that improves their overall welfare conditions. More specifically, the EFSA will focus on the welfare of male dairy calves raised for producing "white" veal meat and the risks associated with individual housing, insufficient space and feed restriction (such as deprivation of iron and fibres). Additionally, the EFSA will assess the welfare of dairy calves and the risks associated with limited cow-calf bond.

All these new opinions will further complement the opinions on slaughter recently produced by the EFSA², by assessing the Animal Based Measures (ABMs) collected in slaughterhouses to monitor the level of welfare of these animals on farms.

Nine years after the last opinion, the EFSA will re-assesses the welfare of farmed animals during transport

The EFSA will also carry out an assessment³ of the welfare of equids, bovine, small ruminant, pigs, domestic birds and rabbits during transport³. The EU Authority will provide an in-depth assessment, by describing for each animal category the different transport phases, the welfare consequences and the relevant ABMs, and the main hazards. The EFSA will then recommend resource- and management-based measures to correct, prevent, mitigate these welfare consequences. Particularly, the EFSA will focus on those scenarios proven to be particularly problematic for animals:

- the export by sea (journeys involving the combination road/livestock vessels) of adult cattle, weaned calves and sheep over long-distance journeys;

² The EFSA very recently released Scientific Opinions on the [welfare of rabbits at slaughter](#) and [during killing operations](#); the [welfare of poultry at slaughter and during killing operations](#); the [welfare of pigs during slaughter](#) and [killing operations](#). A Scientific Opinion on welfare of cattle during slaughter and killing operation, and a scientific opinion on the welfare of small ruminants and ratites at slaughter and during killing operations are expected to be published in the upcoming years.

³ The request sent to the EFSA, includes any journey regardless of the duration (short-, long-, very long-distance).

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- the export by road of adult cattle, weaned calves and sheep over long-distance journeys by road involving the use of facilities where animals are unloaded and reloaded (control posts, livestock markets) or when animals are kept in stationary vehicles for hours (exit points) including in third countries;
- the transport of adult cattle, calves and sheep over long-distance journeys involving the combination road/roll-on-roll-off vessels;
- the transport of end-of-career animals dairy cows, breeding sows, and laying hens to the slaughterhouse;
- the transport of unweaned calves over long-distance journeys, assessing the risks associated with their fitness for transport, and the watering, feeding and thermal comfort;
- the transport of horses over long-distance to slaughter;
- the transport of ruminants and pigs where unloading them before the final destination might jeopardize their health status.

Over the years, transport during high temperature seasons has proven to be an animal welfare concern. With the temperature increase, due to climate change, transport of live animals under extreme temperatures is an urgent issue to be addressed. Throughout the years the EU Commission has urged the Chief Veterinary Officers (CVOs) not to approve journeys with temperatures higher than 30 degrees Celsius; and now it mandated the EFSA to assess for the scenarios listed above the risks associated with extremely high or low temperatures (> than 30 degrees/ < than 5 degrees), including the difficulty of measuring temperature, humidity and gas concentration within animals' compartment

Timeline

The agreed deadlines for the publishing of the EFSA opinions are the following⁴: Welfare during Transport and Welfare of Pigs - June 2022; Welfare of Broilers and Laying Hens - December 2022; Welfare of Calves - March 2023

Conclusion

During the past six years we have witnessed a drastic reduction in the outputs delivered by the EFSA on animal welfare. Now with the EU Farm-to-fork Strategy, Eurogroup for Animals welcomed the decision of the EU Commission to mandate the EU Agency of key scientific assessments: The Term of References are comprehensive and instrumental to inform the EU Commission as well as the EU Member States and the EU Parliament on the legislative needs of the Union with regards to animal welfare.

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⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/animals/docs/aw_platform_20200615_pres-02.pdf - Slide 10