

ORGANIC FARMING

CURRENT SITUATION

Organic farming is one of a number of approaches to sustainable agriculture. It is broadly defined as a holistic production management system which tries to work with nature, promoting biodiversity, biological cycles and soil biological activity. In principle, it largely excludes or avoids the use of synthetically-compounded fertilisers, pesticides, growth and yield promoting substances and livestock feed additives. Organic farming standards for animals are to a large extent devised around the concept that animals should be able to live their lives as naturally as possible meeting their biological and ethological needs. Therefore organic livestock farming includes more provisions for outdoor keeping of animals and should in principle also include the use of breeds adapted to local conditions. Generally speaking organic farming performs better than conventional farming in the area of animal welfare.

Whilst Eurogroup for Animals is very supportive of organic farming as a system that can benefit the welfare of animals, we also want to ensure that several exceptions to animal welfare rules that are possible in the current EU regulation on organic farming, such as the use of inappropriate breeds, the tethering of livestock, and unnecessary castration will be removed. Ill-defined provisions for transport and slaughter, among other practices, must be developed and improved. Detailed rules for some livestock species, such as rabbits, are currently missing, and existing rules for several species, including calves and sows, are inadequate.

Indeed the assumption that animal welfare is equally protected across the EU even in organic farming is a false one today. Eurogroup wants to help make it a reality as part of the current revision of EU organic farming policy.

LEGISLATION

Earlier last year, in 2014, the European Commission published the long awaited proposal for a new Regulation on organic farming and production (2014/0100 (COD)). The proposal, which could replace Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007 following a period of transition, aims to improve the existing legislation on organic production to better support its sustainable development, guarantee fair competition for farmers and operators, and maintain consumer confidence in organic products. But will the proposed legislation reach its objective?

Technical discussions commenced between Member States in 2014 under the Italian presidency, and a general compromise on the revision of organic rules was reached in the Council in June 2015. The European Parliament's Agriculture Committee adopted its report on organic farming in October 2015, and now negotiations between the EU institutions are underway under the Luxemburg presidency. Enforcement of the final legislation, once agreed by the EU institutions, is not expected before 2017 at earliest, but discussions are progressing rapidly. Eurogroup is very concerned that these discussions may neglect animal welfare considerations if not immediately addressed by EU decision makers. We thus urge you to please consider our concerns below.

CHANGES URGENTLY NEEDED

A comprehensive analysis conducted by Eurogroup and its members shows that the newly proposed organic legislation falls drastically short of protecting animal welfare at all stages of production and therefore cannot ensure consumer confidence of organic animal products across the EU in its current form. The majority of shortcomings that exist in current legislation on organic farming are being perpetuated in the future organic framework that is proposed. These include:

- Need to ensure use of adapted breeds by specifying certain detailed breeding requirements where appropriate
- Need to ensure appropriate outdoor access for all livestock and ban inappropriate exemptions that allow tethering of livestock on small holdings
- Need to end keeping methods that confine young calves and pregnant sows
- Need to stop mutilations, including pig castration which is avoidable. Mutilations must only be carried out if truly needed for individual animals for health reasons and conducted with appropriate general anaesthesia and prolonged pain relief.
- Need to ensure that duration of transport is minimised and that conditions of transport are optimized. Animals must always be slaughtered as close as possible to their point of production.
- Need to require appropriate pre-stunning of animals before slaughter without exemption, and need to phase out certain methods of stunning, e.g. use of water-bath stunners for poultry, and to provide for the adoption of detailed standards for humane slaughter
- Need to include specific rules to protect rabbits and aquaculture species and to revise certain housing rules for other species in line with their behavioural needs

At a time when the demand for organic products is increasing and consumer awareness of and interest in animal welfare is also on the rise, we urge EU decision makers to use this moment to ensure improved harmonization and enforcement of higher animal welfare standards in organic farming to benefit animals and consumers that care. Rather than perpetuate the poor animal management practices of those farmers that do not meet higher standards, the regulation and any proposed policy actions should be actively supporting the universal attainment of higher standards in organic animal farming.

Unfortunately, the fight to improve the Commission's proposal will be an uphill battle, since several economically vested stakeholders want to maintain flexibility in organic legislation that would allow for existing exceptions to animal welfare related provisions and ill-defined management standards to be maintained.