
Give rabbits more space, say MEPs as they call for phasing out battery cages

EU member states should encourage rabbit farmers to phase out conventional battery cages and replace them with healthier but affordable alternatives, such as park farming systems, says the Parliament in a resolution voted on Tuesday. MEPs argue that improving rabbits' welfare and living conditions would help prevent disease, thus reducing the need for intensive use of antibiotics that might end up in the human food chain, and they call on the Commission to table a draft law to this end.

"We have to move away from keeping farm rabbits in cages. We need minimum standards for protection of these animals such as we have for laying hens, pigs and cows. At the same time, we have to take into account the economic needs of rabbit breeders and farmers," said rapporteur Stefan Eck (GUE/NGL, DE) before the vote.

"There has been a drop in demand for rabbit meat (...) because consumers are asking for higher health and welfare standards for animals kept for farming. What we now need to do is harmonize the internal market and meet the wishes of consumers for better animal protection and animal welfare," he added.

Parliament approved the non-legislative resolution by 410 votes in favour to 205 against, with 59 abstentions.

Improved animal welfare would benefit consumers too

Public health goes hand in hand with animal health, which depends inter alia on housing conditions, good animal husbandry and management, says the resolution.

To ensure that rabbit farms are better managed and monitored, MEPs encourage all EU states to gradually phase out the use of battery cages and replace them with higher-welfare alternatives that would allow for better disease-prevention and targeted checks. This could also help to cut the widespread use of antibiotics in intensive farming and thus benefit end consumers too, they say.

Finding a sustainable farming system

The EU Commission and member states should encourage research into the best housing systems to improve the welfare of rabbits, say MEPs. They nonetheless stress the need to

strike a balance between animal welfare, the financial situation of farmers and the affordability of rabbit meat for consumers, adding that the sustainability of rabbit farms must be ensured.

New EU law to define minimum welfare standards for rabbits

The EU Commission should propose guidelines and EU-wide recommendations on farmed rabbits' health, welfare and housing, and come up with a legislative proposal that would lay out minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits, MEPs say. They also call on the Commission and member states to ensure that rabbit meat imported from outside the EU meets the same food safety and animal welfare criteria as that produced in the EU.

Compensating farmers for higher costs

To offset higher costs of alternative farming systems, the Commission should do more to support the sector and promote the consumption of rabbit meat, MEPs say. They insist on the need for specific support for breeders to cushion the impact of any new compulsory measure and suggest using EU rural development funding to support farmers who opt for higher-welfare alternatives.

Background

Most rabbits farmed in the EU are reared in conventional cages, notes the resolution. Farmed rabbit housing systems have improved over time and alternatives to cages, such as park farming systems, have been used, but they must be further improved and encouraged, MEPs say.

Although 340 million rabbits are slaughtered for meat in the EU every year, this represents less than 1% of the EU's final livestock production. (AGRI_G / EPP_G) Output is falling steadily - by 4.7% in 2016 according to forecasts – because consumer demand is falling.

The EU is the world's leading rabbit producer, ahead of China, which is its leading rabbit meat exporter. Around 99% of the EU's rabbit meat imports originate in China.

Chinese producers could out-compete EU farmers, with adverse animal welfare implications, if no action is taken, warn MEPs.

Further information

[Adopted text 2016/2077\(INI\) will soon be available here \(14.03.2017\)](#)

[Video recording of debate \(14.03.2017\)](#)

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