

EU trade and transport of live animals

Every year, millions of live animals are transported within and outside European Union (EU) territory for trade purposes. EU legislation regulates the protection of animals during transport, but reports of breaches of the rules and accidents raise doubts on the transport of live animals and have rekindled the debate on the need to improve the current legislation.

Background

The EU has a large population of farm animals. In 2018, EU herds counted 87 million [bovine](#) animals, 147 million [pigs](#), some 100 million [sheep](#) and [goats](#), 290 million laying [hens](#), not to forget countless [chicks](#) and other types of animals, from rabbits to horses. Most of these animals experience transport during their life. In most cases, it is essentially domestic transport, i.e. transport from the farm to the slaughterhouse, or from one farm to another for production reasons (such as calves transported to cattle-fattening farms). In some cases, transport of live animals from one place to another occurs in relation to trade, because animals are sold alive on the market for different purposes. This happens in both intra-EU trade and with EU imports and exports to or from third countries. The distances travelled can vary a lot.

The EU legislative framework

Transport of live animals is regulated by Council Regulation (EC) [No 1/2005](#) on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. It covers the transport of live animals (mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish) taking place in connection with an economic activity, both within the EU and when entering or leaving the Union. An EPRS [European Implementation Assessment](#) of October 2018 provides a comprehensive overview of the main issues at stake in transport of live animals and of the implementation of the legislation by national competent authorities, with which lies primary responsibility for carrying out checks on both animals and means of transport, and taking appropriate enforcement measures.

EU transport of live animals in numbers

Number of animals transported for trade

Approximately 3.5 million sheep and goats, 4.3 million head of cattle, 33.4 million pigs, and 1 000 million poultry were traded alive between EU countries [in 2018](#). Belgium, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, and Italy exchanged more than [1.8 million](#) head of cattle. The reason behind over [70 % of animal transfers within the EU](#) was the production cycle, in the case of cattle and pigs, and slaughtering, in the case of sheep and goats. The import and export of live animals with third countries represents less than [10 %](#) of intra-EU trade. Cattle is the most traded live animal category, mostly for export to third countries (below half a million animals in 2015). The number of live pigs traded with third countries is much lower than the number of pigs exchanged for intra-EU trade, whereas the number of live sheep exported from the EU ([2 million](#) a year) is almost as high as the number of sheep traded within the EU.

EU countries of origin and destination of animals transported for trade

Trade of live animals involves all world regions. Some EU countries appear among the main importers and exporters at [global level](#). Table 1 provides an overview of the main EU players for each animal category.

Table 1 – Top EU traders of live animals in 2017 (total of intra- and extra-EU trade) in million head of animals

Main importers	Cattle	Italy	1.2	Sheep	Italy	1.0	Pigs	Germany	15.2	Chickens	Netherlands	474
		Netherlands	1.0		Greece	0.4		Poland	7.0		Germany	186
		Spain	0.7		Spain	0.3		Netherlands	1.9		Belgium	142
Main exporters	Cattle	France	1.6	Sheep	Romania	2.4	Pigs	Denmark	15.2	Chickens	Netherlands	354
		Germany	0.9		Spain	1.1		Netherlands	11.8		Germany	328
		Netherlands	0.5		Hungary	0.6		Germany	2.4		Belgium	132

Data source: UN Food and Agriculture Organization, [FAOSTAT – Live animals](#), January 2020.

Economic value of EU trade in live animals

The value of EU trade in live animals

The value of intra-EU trade in live animals was €8.6 billion in 2018. Bovine animals, pigs and poultry made the highest values. The value of EU trade in live animals with countries outside the EU was much lower, and amounted to less than €3 billion in 2018, the greatest part represented by EU exports to third countries. Bovine animals, poultry, and sheep and goats made the highest values in EU exports of live animals for food production. EU exports of live horses are typically

related to non-food purposes, as well as the vast majority of EU imports of live animals, which involves mostly horses and other categories of animals (such as other mammals, birds, reptiles, bees, insects, etc.). EU exports of live animals to third countries have been [rising](#) in recent years.

Live animals vs animal products

In 2018, EU countries traded meat and edible meat offal for about €37 billion in intra-EU trade and for about €14 billion outside the EU (70 % of which was represented by EU exports and 30 % by EU imports).

Generally, for any type of trade and animal category, the value of EU trade in meat and edible meat offal is much higher than the value of EU trade in live animals. Only the value of EU exports of live sheep and goats and, to a lesser extent, of live bovine animals, is higher than the value of EU exports of the respective meat and meat offal, as shown in Figure 1.

European Parliament position

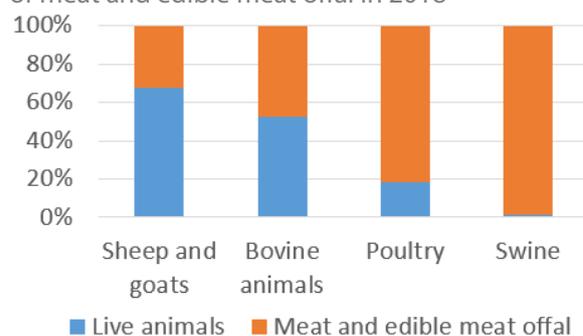
The conditions of transport of live animals are part of the wider sphere of animal protection and welfare. The EU policy on animal welfare, including its [2012-2015 strategy](#), has lifted EU standards in this domain. To continue delivering, Parliament has advocated on a number of occasions – such as in its January 2020 [resolution](#) on the European Green Deal – a proposal for a new strategy to pave the way for a general EU animal welfare law. However, what has prevailed so far is to prioritise the implementation and enforcement of existing legislation. Parliament has also brought up the issues of export and transport of live animals and the treatment of animals exported to third countries (such as slaughtering methods). In a 2019 [resolution](#), it acknowledged progress made, but expressed concerns over reports of breaches of the rules and of inappropriate vehicles used for animal transport. In November 2019, the sinking in the Black Sea of a cargo ship with more than 14 000 sheep on board reignited criticism of the cruel conditions in which animals are transported over long distances and, more generally, against the export and transport of live animals, due to the [harsh conditions](#) in which animals are kept. Following this accident, on 17 December 2019, Parliament held a [debate](#) in plenary, during which the Council representative announced the adoption of Council [conclusions](#) on animal welfare that acknowledge the need to continue improving the welfare of animals in transport over long distances. The Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Stella Kyriakides, reiterated the [initiatives](#) undertaken by the Commission and the need to address unresolved issues. A number of Members took the floor to demand better treatment of animals during transport, and some Members called for new rules to limit or prohibit transport of live animals. Moreover, the Parliament's Animal Welfare Intergroup held a [meeting](#) focused on the transport of Romanian sheep to the Persian Gulf, and more generally on the conditions of the transport of unweaned animals, including within the EU.

Table 2 – Value of EU trade in live animals (in €) and shares of animal categories (%) in 2018

	Intra EU trade	EU exports	EU imports
All animal categories	8.6 billion	2.8 billion	0.2 billion
Bovine animals	32.3	44.1	0.1
Equidae	9.6	25.1	58.8
Poultry	20.6	12.3	2.3
Sheep and goats	2.5	9.9	0.1
Swine	28.8	2.2	1.3
Others	6.2	6.4	37.4

Data source: Eurostat, [ComExt](#), December 2019.

Figure 1 – Value of EU exports of live animals and of meat and edible meat offal in 2018



Data source: Eurostat, [ComExt](#), December 2019.

