Animal welfare protection in the EU
Strategy and law

SUMMARY

In recent decades, concern for animal welfare has been growing among citizens, businesses and policy-makers. The topic has been on the EU policy agenda for nearly 50 years, with the first EU law on the welfare of animals adopted in 1974. Since then, the EU has developed and expanded the scope of legislation in this area, achieving considerable improvements in the living conditions of farm animals and establishing some of the world’s highest animal welfare standards.

In 2012, the EU adopted a strategy for the protection and welfare of animals covering the period until 2015. When this strategy was about to expire, discussions arose about its continuation and possible further policy steps. Both the European Commission and the Member States preferred to focus on improving the enforcement of existing rules rather than creating new law. However, developments in the following years – including a successful European citizens’ initiative – pushed specific animal welfare issues into the spotlight, and the need for a comprehensive animal welfare law became a recurring subject of debate.

An evaluation of the 2012-2015 strategy, undertaken following recommendations of the European Court of Auditors, found that it failed to deliver on the objective of introducing an EU legislative framework on animal welfare. Consequently, the Commission announced that in 2023 it would revise the EU animal welfare legislation and come up with a single, comprehensive law.

This briefing builds on a previous EPRS briefing on the EU’s 2012-2015 strategy for the protection and welfare of animals and highlights developments that have occurred since that strategy expired.
Introduction

Animal welfare has many dimensions, ranging from scientific to ethical, economic, cultural and political. According to a definition provided by the World Organisation for Animal Health –WOAH (formerly the Office International des Epizooties – OIE), ‘An animal is in a good state of welfare if ... it is healthy, comfortable, well nourished, safe, able to express innate behaviour, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress’. This understanding of animal welfare is based on the concept of five freedoms: freedom from hunger and thirst; from fear and distress; from heat stress or physical discomfort; from pain, injury and disease; and freedom to express normal patterns of behaviour. In recent years, a shift in framing has been made towards the more positive five domains: good nutrition, physical environment, health, behavioural interactions and mental state.

Consumers have shown growing concern for animal welfare, and consequently producers are increasingly taking animal welfare into account. Laws, guidelines and best practices are constantly being developed and improved. The EU is a leader in this area, with standards that are among the highest in the world. Actions taken at EU level have led to significant achievements. For example, they have improved housing conditions for laying hens (by placing a ban on battery cages), broilers and pigs (in particular pregnant sows). Better arrangements for the transport of live animals have been introduced with a view to reducing injury and exhaustion. EU legislation on the killing of animals aims to minimise pain and suffering at slaughter by defining appropriate methods for stunning.

Notwithstanding these achievements, it has been noted in various reports, studies and evaluations, undertaken both by EU institutions and external stakeholders, that while legislation has contributed to improving the welfare of kept animals, weaknesses persist in certain areas – in particular, implementation. For instance, major welfare concerns occur regarding the transport of live animals within and, even more so, outside the EU. When rules are not respected, animals can suffer from stress, hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and lack of space and rest. This applies particularly to long-distance transport of unweaned animals, pregnant animals, and animals that should have been identified during loading as unfit for transport. Studies note that mutilation practices, such as routine tail docking of pigs, beak trimming and castration of chickens, and castration of piglets are not always applied in accordance with the law. A further issue is the rearing of animals in cages, where conditions are at times detrimental to their health and welfare. This particular problem has been brought to the fore by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizens, notably in a successful European citizens’ initiative (see below). Finally, reports have pointed out that not all species of farmed animals, such as fish, rabbits, cows, ducks and turkeys, among others, are covered by separate, species-specific legislation.

While consumers are increasingly interested in the welfare of animals in connection with the products they buy, there is currently no specific EU law regulating animal welfare labelling. Some EU rules (for instance on organic farming and on marketing standards for eggs) provide consumers with information on the farming methods used, thus giving some indication of animal welfare protection during production. Beyond this, information available to consumers is dependent on national labelling schemes (where they exist), which follow various approaches and are based on differing levels of animal protection.

As most EU animal welfare standards do not apply to imported products, concerns have been raised about the level of animal protection in partner countries. Moreover, the lack of import standards could create a competitive disadvantage for EU producers, who have to meet higher standards and bear the associated costs.
Animal welfare in EU public opinion

In recent decades, there has been a visible shift in the public attitude towards animals. Consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about animals’ wellbeing and their most important needs. This trend has been growing in countries such as the US, Canada and Australia, and is gradually gaining ground in developing countries as well. The European Commission had already recognised this fact while working on the Community action plan on the protection and welfare of animals for 2006 to 2010.

In 2005, a Eurobarometer 229 survey on the ‘Attitude of Europeans towards Animal Welfare’ showed that 74% of consumers believed shopping choices could impact the way animals are treated, and 57% were willing to pay more for animal welfare-friendly food products. Eurobarometer 270 (2007) revealed again the high level of importance EU citizens attached to the welfare of farmed animals: the average rating was 7.8 on a scale of importance where 10 was the maximum, with 34% of respondents giving it a 10. Some 77% wanted further improvements of current animal welfare standards in their home country. A majority (63%) showed some willingness to change their usual place of shopping in order to be able to purchase more animal welfare-friendly products.

Responding to sustained public interest in the issue, in 2015, the Commission launched another Eurobarometer survey on Europeans’ attitudes towards animal welfare, with the intention to take the results into account in future policy initiatives. The special Eurobarometer 442 was published in March 2016. It found that the overwhelming majority (94%) of respondents thought that protecting animal welfare was important, with well over half considering it very important (see Figure 1). Some 47% considered that the current choice of animal-welfare-friendly food products in shops and supermarkets was not sufficient (9 percentage points more than in the 2006 Eurobarometer). More than half of the respondents (59%) said they would be willing to pay more for products sourced from animal welfare-friendly production systems (with 35% willing to pay up to 5% more, but only 3% willing to pay more than an additional 20%); however, more than a third (35%) were not ready to pay more. Some 82% of respondents believed that the welfare of farmed animals in their country should be better protected (up 5 percentage points compared to 2006).

The special Eurobarometer 505 ‘Making our food fit for the future – Citizens’ expectations’, published in October 2020, aimed to uncover what factors influence people’s food buying and eating habits, as well as to gather their views on the sustainability of food and food systems. Even though animal welfare was not the topic of this survey, when faced with the question of what they considered to be the most important characteristics of ‘sustainable’ food, 20% of respondents included ‘high animal welfare standards’ in their top three answers.

In 2018, a European citizens’ initiative (ECI) ‘End the Cage Age’ called on the European Commission to end the practice of keeping animals in cages and to propose legislation to prohibit the use of cages. The initiative collected nearly 1.4 million signatures from supporters across the EU and was the sixth successful ECI out of 76 registered to that date. In response, the Commission committed to
EU legal framework: Protecting animal welfare since the 1970s

Animal welfare has been on the EU policy agenda for almost 50 years. The first piece of legislation on this topic was adopted in 1974. Further acts followed and legislation now addresses a range of (mostly farm) animal species and various issues relating to the welfare of animals throughout their lives. A horizontal directive lays down the standards for the protection of all farmed animals. Specific acts cover the protection of pigs, calves, laying hens and chickens. There are also rules on welfare standards for the transport of animals and conditions at the time of their killing (stunning and slaughter). Legislation has been put in place for wild animals in zoos and for animals used for scientific purposes. The EU rules on organic farming include high animal welfare standards.

The importance of animal welfare is reflected in EU primary law. In 1992, a Declaration on the protection of animals appended to the Treaty of Maastricht called on the EU institutions and Member States to give regard to the welfare requirements of animals. A protocol to the Amsterdam Treaty from 1997 recognised animals as sentient beings, and stated that ‘in formulating and implementing the Community’s agriculture, transport, internal market and research policies, the Community and the Member States shall pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals, while respecting the legislative or administrative provisions and customs of the Member States relating in particular to religious rites, cultural traditions and regional heritage’. These provisions have subsequently been incorporated into the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU as its Article 13.

In 2006, the strands of EU policy on animal welfare were brought together for the first time in a European Commission 2006-2010 Community action plan on the protection and welfare of animals. Its main goals were to upgrade existing standards for animal protection and welfare, to introduce standardised animal welfare indicators, to ensure that animal keepers and the general public are involved and informed on these standards, to give high priority to promoting relevant research and to further support international cooperation in the animal welfare field.

A 2010 evaluation of EU animal welfare policy, carried out for the European Commission, found that the legislation in place had generally improved welfare for the groups of animals to which it applied. However, to be effective, the legislation needed to contain clear and detailed requirements, and cover all aspects of welfare. The evaluation found that implementation varied across the EU, hindering progress towards uniform high standards, arguing that more could be achieved with stronger and consistent enforcement. It recommended extending the scope of the legislation to include groups of animals not covered by existing laws (such as cattle, rabbits, sheep, geese and ducks), either through species-specific acts or through an all-encompassing EU animal welfare law.

EU strategy on animal welfare 2012-2015

Building on the experience gained through the above-mentioned Community action plan, in 2012 the Commission proposed an EU strategy for the protection and welfare of animals for the 2012-2015 period. It detailed action to be taken over the period to address the following gaps: lack of enforcement of the existing legislation by Member States, insufficient information on and knowledge of animal welfare among consumers and stakeholders, and a need to simplify existing principles on animal welfare and develop clear new ones.

The proposed approach consisted of two parts: reinforcement of current actions, and a possible simplified comprehensive EU legislative framework for animal welfare. The goal was to create the basis for improving welfare standards and to ensure that they are applied and enforced in all Member States. This included laying out a set of general principles to cover the above-mentioned gaps and, in addition, improving training for animal keepers and veterinarians who inspect farms; building international cooperation on animal welfare; and finally, performing studies on issues
where there appear to be the most problems for animal welfare. The envisaged EU welfare law would promote an innovative approach and focus on actual welfare outcomes.

The strategy listed actions to be completed by 2015: reports on implementation or policy alternatives, enforcement activities, studies on policy issues and a possible legislative proposal which the Commission envisaged presenting by 2014. Only four of these actions were completed within the planned deadline; the others were delayed by 2 to 4 years, with the final action finished in 2018 (see Annex 1 to the European Court of Auditors report ‘Animal welfare in the EU: closing the gap between ambitious goals and practical implementation’). Ultimately, the idea of a proposal for a simplified EU legislative framework for animal welfare was dropped.

Developments after the strategy
EU platform for animal welfare

When the EU 2012-2015 animal welfare strategy was about to expire, discussions arose about its continuation and possible further policy steps. The European Commission’s intention was to focus on improving the enforcement of existing rules rather than presenting the previously envisaged proposal for an EU legislative framework on animal welfare. A similar approach prevailed in the Council of the EU, where Member States, too, prioritised the enforcement of existing rules over the introduction of new legislation. However, they broadly backed the project of creating an EU platform that would serve as a common forum in which the Commission, Member States, animal welfare organisations, producers’ organisations, veterinary associations, consumers and others could discuss matters concerning animal welfare.

The EU Platform on Animal Welfare, a European Commission expert group, was established in 2017. It facilitates dialogue between public entities (EU bodies, international organisations, and authorities from Member States and EEA countries) and private stakeholders in the animal welfare sector (business and professional organisations, civil society organisations, and independent experts from academic and research institutes). Thematic sub-groups may be created within the platform to work on specific issues in animal welfare. Two sub-groups, on animal transport and pigs, were formed in 2018; a third one, on animal welfare labelling, in 2020; and three more, on animal welfare at the time of killing, the welfare of poultry, and the welfare on calves and dairy cows, in 2022. The platform adopts conclusions drawn up by its working groups and publishes factsheets, recommendations and guidelines on the various species and issues addressed.

The 2017 Official Controls Regulation, which regulates ‘official controls and other official activities performed to ensure the application of food and feed law, rules on animal health and welfare, plant health and plant protection products’, also mandates the establishment of EU reference centres for animal welfare. The aim of these centres is to improve the enforcement of legislation by providing technical support and assisting Member States in carrying out official controls for animal welfare. They aim to disseminate best practices by sharing scientific and technical expertise, conducting studies and developing methods for improving and assessing the welfare level of animals.

European Court of Auditors special report

On 14 November 2018, the European Court of Auditors (ECA) published its Special report No 31/2018 ‘Animal welfare in the EU: closing the gap between ambitious goals and practical implementation’. The aim of the audit was to assess the actions taken by the Commission and the Member States to improve the welfare of farm animals following the EU’s 2012-2015 animal welfare strategy. The auditors visited five Member States: Germany, France, Italy, Poland and Romania (which together account for more than 50% of the EU’s meat market), examining how the welfare of farm animals is controlled and how the strategy is implemented overall.

The report concluded that EU action has been successful in some important areas, such as the group housing of sows and the ban on cages for laying hens. Weaknesses were found, however, in other
areas, such as the continued routine tail docking of pigs (a prohibited practice), the lack of compliance with rules on long-distance transport and transport of unfit animals, and the use of certain non-compliant stunning procedures at slaughter. The ECA found that coordination with cross-compliance checks could be improved, and that better use could be made of the financial resources of the common agricultural policy (CAP) to promote higher animal welfare standards.

The auditors made a number of recommendations to the Commission. They advised the Commission to develop a more effective enforcement strategy, to strengthen the links between cross-compliance and official inspections on animal welfare, and to encourage Member States to better address animal welfare through rural development policy. They also recommended that the Commission carry out an evaluation of the strategy in order to identify to what extent its objectives had been achieved and if the guidance it has issued was being applied.

Evaluation of the strategy

Following the recommendation made by the European Court of Auditors in the above-mentioned special report, the Commission launched an evaluation of the 2012-2015 animal welfare strategy. The final report was published in March 2021.

The evaluation assessed the strategy’s effectiveness, efficiency and EU added value, as well as its relevance and coherence. It found that the majority of problems identified in 2012 were still relevant at the time of evaluation, such as the need to improve compliance across Member States in certain risk areas (e.g. animal transport, routine tail docking of pigs, and certain stunning methods).

Regarding the regulatory framework, gaps that existed in 2012 remained, such as the absence of EU-level rules on the protection of certain farmed species. In addition, the need to simplify existing rules and to improve their enforceability continued to be relevant, as the strategy did not contribute significantly to addressing these issues. The report noted the need to further optimise synergies with the common agricultural policy to make better use of the instruments it offers to improve animal welfare and to increase farmers’ awareness of animal welfare requirements. While the strategy was generally coherent with food safety and research policies, there was room to improve coherence with fisheries, trade, environmental and transport policies.

The conclusion was that the strategy had contributed to improvements in animal welfare across the EU, to improvements in knowledge and sharing of best practices, and to enforcement of EU legislation in specific areas (i.e. group housing of sows and protection of laying hens). However, none of the strategy’s objectives had been fully achieved. Notably, the strategy had failed to deliver on the objective of introducing a simplified EU legislative framework on animal welfare.

CAP reform

In the previous financing period (2014-2020), the common agricultural policy (CAP) provided a number of measures and instruments with a potential effect on animal welfare, such as the cross-compliance scheme, the marketing standards for egg production, the rural development legislation (which included specific measures and financial instruments related to animal welfare), and the rules on organic farming. The fitness check of animal welfare legislation undertaken by the Commission found that these instruments contributed, to some extent, to improving animal welfare, with the rural development measures and the cross-compliance scheme being most effective, however, the overall effect was not significant.

In December 2021, after nearly 3 years of negotiations, the Parliament and the Council adopted the new legislative framework for a reformed common agricultural policy, which entered into force in 2023. In line with the European Green Deal and the ‘farm to fork’ and biodiversity strategies, it provides financial support and incentives to help farmers shift to more environmentally friendly farming. It introduces a new form of direct payments: eco-schemes. Member States must offer them to farmers and must allocate to the eco-schemes at least 25 % of their direct payments budget. Participation in the eco-schemes is voluntary for farmers, the aim being to reward those who adopt
climate- and environmentally friendly farming practices, which also include measures to improve animal welfare. In addition, at least 35% of rural development funds will be allocated to agri-environment measures that promote environmental, climate and animal welfare practices.

**Revision of EU animal welfare legislation**

On 20 May 2020, the Commission adopted the ‘farm to fork strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally friendly food system’. In the accompanying action plan, the Commission put forward 27 legislative and non-legislative measures to be taken, including the evaluation and revision of the existing animal welfare legislation. The strategy announced that the Commission would revise the EU animal welfare legislation by the end of 2023, and also consider options for animal welfare labelling to transmit value more effectively through the food chain. The revision would broaden the scope of the legislation, bring it into alignment with the latest scientific evidence, and facilitate its enforcement. It would review the horizontal directive on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes, the four directives on the protection of laying hens, broilers, pigs and calves, and the two regulations on the protection of animals during transport and at the time of killing. It would also look at fish and fur animals kept for farming purposes, as well as cats and dogs in the context of transport for commercial purposes.

As outlined in the farm to fork strategy, the Commission carried out an evaluation (‘fitness check’) of the current legislation on animal welfare. Its outcome, published in October 2022, generally confirmed the conclusions of previous evaluations and the need to revise and modernise the law. Furthermore, in July 2021 the Commission published a roadmap for an impact assessment that would analyse the economic, social and environmental impact of the envisaged changes. The findings of the fitness check will inform the revision.

The revision will also include a proposal to ban the use of cages for keeping animals. Responding to the European citizens' initiative 'End the Cage Age', in June 2021 the Commission published a communication in which it committed to table, by the end of 2023, a legislative proposal to phase out and ultimately prohibit the use of cage systems for animals mentioned in the initiative, as well as the use of farrowing crates for sows, sow stalls and individual calf pens.

In view of this revision of the animal welfare legislation, the Commission mandated the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to develop scientific opinions on the welfare of animals during transport; on the general welfare of pigs, broilers and laying hens, calves and dairy cows; and on the welfare of ducks, geese and quails with respect to housing conditions (in the context of the 'End of Cage Age' European citizens' initiative). A roadmap summarises the planning for the preparation of opinions. Opinions concerning the Commission mandates are scheduled to be prepared by the end of 2023; further opinions are planned until 2030, covering a range of other animal species.

**Council of the EU**

In December 2014, the Danish, German and Dutch agriculture ministers adopted a joint declaration on animal welfare. The declaration stated that the EU should maintain its leading position in the animal welfare field after the expiry of the EU's 2012-2015 animal welfare strategy, and called for further action in the areas of regulation, animal welfare, and the promotion of awareness and knowledge. In addition, the declaration called upon the Commission to establish an EU platform for animal welfare (as mentioned above).

In February 2019, the Council adopted conclusions based on the ECA special report, noting that there were still some weaknesses regarding compliance with minimum standards, and that the financial resources of the common agricultural policy could be better used to promote higher animal welfare standards. In December 2019, the Council adopted conclusions on animal welfare, inviting the Commission to develop a new EU strategy for the protection and welfare of animals based on the lessons learned from the strategy for 2012 to 2015. The conclusions identified animal welfare as an integral part of sustainable animal production. They recognised the need to further
update the current legislation (in particular in areas such as animal transport over long distances, animal slaughter, the welfare of cattle over 6 months of age and the welfare of dogs and cats kept in the context of economic activity) to reflect the most recent scientific and technical developments.

At a Council meeting in October 2021, the agriculture ministers of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden urged the Commission to be ambitious in the upcoming review of the EU animal welfare legislation. They highlighted the need to take scientific information into account when updating existing legislation. They also discussed the challenges of enforcing the existing provisions and the lack of specific, EU-level animal welfare requirements for all species that are kept or traded for economic purposes, including house pets. On the whole, Member States acknowledged the need to update animal welfare legislation. A number of delegations stressed the need for a gradual transition to new rules and the importance of maintaining competitiveness, particularly vis-à-vis imports from non-EU countries with different welfare standards.

In December 2022, Ministers discussed the Commission’s fitness check of the current animal welfare legislation. They stressed the need to adopt a harmonised approach at EU level to ensure fairer competition for farmers and food business operators while protecting animal welfare. While some Member States called for an ambitious approach despite the difficult economic situation, others raised concerns about the economic consequences of implementing new legislation and called for sufficiently long transition periods. Ministers also stressed that the EU provides the highest level of animal protection worldwide. To protect the market, rules should be established ensuring that products imported from third countries meet similar animal welfare standards.

European Parliament: Advocating for animal welfare

Parliament has broached the issue of animal welfare on a number of occasions in its work on various legislative dossiers (such as proposals on animal health and official controls). It also makes sure that its voice is heard not only during the legislative process, but in all phases of policy development.

In 2012, Parliament passed a resolution on the then newly adopted EU strategy on animal welfare. It criticised the lack of a proper budget for the actions envisaged and underlined the importance of giving strong support to farmers who uphold standards and good practices for animal husbandry and who invest in better farming facilities. It urged the Commission to prioritise the reciprocity of animal welfare standards when negotiating international trade agreements. It also called on the Commission to prepare a proposal for a simplified EU legislative framework for animal welfare.

On 26 November 2015, Parliament adopted a resolution in which it urged the Commission to implement the points outstanding from the strategy, and to evaluate it. It also called on the Commission to draw up a new and ambitious strategy for the 2016-2020 period in order to ensure continuity of a framework for ensuring high animal welfare standards across the EU. In the resolution, Parliament stressed the importance of ensuring sufficient funding for the common agriculture policy, to prevent the relocation of production and trade to countries with lower animal welfare standards. Finally, Parliament called on the Commission to be more ambitious in including animal welfare standards in negotiations on free trade agreements. This general stance – encouraging the implementation of outstanding points and the drawing up of a new and ambitious strategy – was reiterated in the resolution of 21 July 2016 on Parliament’s priorities for the Commission’s 2017 work programme.

Parliament has also addressed the absence of specific legal provisions to protect the welfare of rabbits and horses, adopting resolutions in March 2017 on minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits and on responsible ownership and care of equidae.

In October 2021, Parliament adopted a resolution on the farm to fork strategy. The resolution called, among other things, for stronger harmonisation of the legal framework for animal husbandry in the EU, using common, science-based animal welfare indicators. To this end, they invited the Commission to evaluate and revise the existing body of animal welfare legislation. Parliament called
on the Commission to adopt a species-by-species approach, to accommodate the specific needs (including housing systems) of each species, to put forward a legislative proposal with the objective of phasing out the use of cages in EU animal farming by 2027. Parliament also called for financial, advisory, and training support for farmers who move to more sustainable farming.

In February 2019, as part of its scrutiny of the implementation of EU legislation on animal welfare, Parliament adopted a resolution on the implementation of Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport within and outside the EU, and in February 2022 a resolution on the implementation report on on-farm animal welfare. The latter resolution focused on the five directives concerning the protection of animals on farms. It noted that the current legislation is not consistently implemented throughout the EU, does not reflect scientific advances and does not cover all species. It called on the Commission once again to develop updated rules based on scientific data, impact assessments, and a species-by-species approach, with a view to ensuring more uniform implementation across Member States. It also reiterated Parliament's support for the European Citizens' Initiative 'End the Cage Age' and urged that the issues of battery cages for laying hens, tail-docking of pigs, and piglet castration be addressed. It stressed that changes in legislation should take into account farmers' perspectives and the competitiveness of the sector, and that farmers must be provided sufficient transition time and support.

Stakeholder views

Organisational views: A sampling

In January 2016, after the expiry of the EU strategy on animal welfare, Eurogroup for Animals, an association grouping animal welfare organisations across Europe, called on the Council to secure the future of EU animal welfare policy and to ensure that it protects all categories of animals, including pets, equines, dairy cows and wild animals. It called for a review of the rules on the protection of animals during transport and for the phasing out of all mutilation in livestock farming. The animal welfare organisation FOUR PAWS welcomed the Council’s support for the creation of an EU animal welfare platform, saying that it could lead to a more consistent EU institutional approach to animal welfare, as well as to better enforcement at national level. Citing concerns about the fragmentation of animal welfare efforts across institutional entities, it saw potential for such a platform to integrate the idea of a 'one-stop-shop for animal welfare'. The farmers' and cooperatives' organisation COPA-COGECA stated, in response to Council discussions on further animal welfare policy and on setting up an animal welfare platform, that the EU already had high animal welfare standards in place, and that efforts should be directed at ensuring the implementation and harmonisation of existing EU rules, rather than at creating new legislation.

European Parliament: Intergroup and special committee of inquiry

The Parliament's Intergroup on the Welfare and Conservation of Animals gathers Members from all political groups to debate animal welfare issues. In 2014, the intergroup called on the new Commission to put forward a new animal welfare strategy and to deliver results on all planned initiatives listed in the strategy for 2012 to 2015, including an animal welfare framework law. The intergroup reiterated its call for a new EU animal welfare strategy in June 2016, and at the start of the 2019-2024 parliamentary term. The intergroup's working group on cage-free farming actively supported the 'End the Cage Age' European citizens' initiative, on which Parliament adopted a resolution in 2021 following a public hearing.

In 2020, Parliament established a Committee of Inquiry on the Protection of Animals during Transport (ANIT). An inquiry committee is an instrument that Parliament can set up to investigate breaches of Union law or alleged maladministration; only a few such committees have been created in Parliament's history. ANIT's report on alleged contraventions of EU law on protection of animals during transport was adopted in January 2022.
The new vision of agri-food policy presented in the farm to fork strategy and the Commission’s commitment to revise and improve animal welfare legislation was met with mostly favourable reactions. The organisation Compassion in World Farming welcomed this development but regretted the ‘timid approach’ the Commission has taken on some issues, such as the suffering of animals in long-distance transport (especially in exports to third countries), cruel killing methods, the use of cages in farming, and a lack of legislation for the protection of farmed fish. Together with two other EU animal welfare NGOs, FOURPAWS and World Animal Protection, Compassion in World Farming sent out a press release on the farm to fork and biodiversity strategies, pointing out that the strategies need to be more ambitious, and follow through in key areas that affect animal welfare.

In its position on the farm to fork strategy, published on 16 March 2020, COPA-COGECA noted that the introduction of measures to improve animal welfare in animal husbandry requires considerable investment from farmers, the cost of which is often not recuperated because of market conditions. Recognising the role of the CAP in guaranteeing animal welfare, it stressed that a framework of incentives is crucial to ensuring commitments to change from farmers. The position stated that reciprocity on animal welfare standards should be a priority for the EU when negotiating trade agreements with third countries and when cooperating with the World Trade Organization, the OIE (WOAH) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

In April 2021, Eurogroup for Animals reacted to the evaluation of the animal welfare strategy. It congratulated the Commission on conducting a thorough and comprehensive evaluation that drew lessons from previous activities in the area of animal welfare. Noting the evaluation’s conclusion that the strategy’s implementation had not delivered against its objectives or generated a significant impact for animals, Eurogroup for Animals expressed appreciation for the Commission’s expressed intent to review the animal welfare acquis as part of the farm to fork strategy.

Commission consultation with stakeholders

As part of its ‘fitness check’ of EU animal welfare legislation, the Commission carried out consultation activities including a public consultation, targeted interviews, a targeted survey and data requests, a stakeholders’ conference, and a call for stakeholder feedback on the fitness check roadmap. The stakeholders consulted included farmers, industry representatives, food processors, transporters, retailers, veterinarians, trade unions, a consumer organisation, NGOs, scientific experts and citizens.

A working document containing the results of these consultations was released in October 2022. While stakeholders across all sectors considered that EU animal welfare legislation was relevant at the time of its adoption, they felt that the current rules were outdated in light of societal and scientific developments. Although the stakeholders’ views seemed to indicate an improvement in animal welfare – and in the level playing field for EU business operators – compared to before the introduction of current EU animal welfare rules, they believed that more could be achieved.

The consultations indicated that while citizens are paying increasing attention to animal welfare in the EU, they lack key information. Price is still very important and consumers are often not willing to pay for animal welfare. In the public consultation, a majority of respondents (65%-84 %) felt or strongly felt that they were not sufficiently informed about the conditions under which animals are farmed, transported and slaughtered in the EU. And 59 % of stakeholders believed that rules and requirements on animal welfare were too complex for consumers to understand.

In the public consultation, almost half of the stakeholders (48 %) agreed or strongly agreed with the claim that, compared with 25 years ago, there is more uniform protection of farmed animals across EU countries. However, an overwhelming majority (92 %) of respondents thought that current EU animal welfare legislation does not ensure adequate and uniform protection of all animal species in need. In addition, a majority of stakeholders (66 %) believed the legislation does not ensure that businesses can compete fairly across the EU.

When asked how to improve animal welfare in the EU, three approaches were considered important by almost 92 % of respondents: providing better information for consumers on animal welfare
EU animal welfare protection in the EU

conditions, increasing the use of scientific indicators to better assess the welfare of animals, and improving training for people handling animals.

MAIN REFERENCES


ENDNOTE

1 This section aims to provide a flavour of the debate and is not intended to be an exhaustive account of all different views on the proposal. Additional information can be found in related publications listed under 'European Parliament supporting analysis'.

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