



TEXTS ADOPTED

P8_TA(2017)0077

Minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits

European Parliament resolution of 14 March 2017 on minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits (2016/2077(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Articles 13 and 43 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),
- having regard to Council Directive 2008/120/EC of 18 December 2008 laying down minimum standards for the protection of pigs,
- having regard to Council Directive 2008/119/EC of 18 December 2008 laying down minimum standards for the protection of calves,
- having regard to Council Directive 1999/74/EC of 19 July 1999 laying down minimum standards for the protection of laying hens,
- having regard to Council Directive 2007/43/EC of 28 June 2007 laying down minimum rules for the protection of chickens kept for meat production,
- having regard to Council Directive 98/58/EC of 20 July 1998 concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes,
- having regard to the Special Eurobarometer 442, entitled ‘Attitudes of Europeans towards Animal Welfare’, published in March 2016,
- having regard to the European Food Safety Authority’s (EFSA) Scientific Opinion Concerning the Welfare of Animals during Transport of 12 January 2011,
- having regard to EFSA’s Scientific Opinion on ‘The impact of the current housing and husbandry systems on the health and welfare of farmed domestic rabbits’ of 11 October 2005,
- having regard to Chapter 7.5 of the World Organisation for Animal Health’s (OIE) Terrestrial Animal Health Code, entitled ‘Slaughter of animals’,
- having regard to the UK Government’s Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of

Rabbits,

- having regard to Rule 52 of its Rules of Procedure,
- having regard to the report of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development (A8-0011/2017),
- A. whereas rabbits are the fourth most farmed animal in the world and the second most farmed species in the EU in terms of numbers;
- B. whereas European producers are required to meet high standards of animal health and welfare that are not always compulsory in third countries exporting animals for slaughter to the EU;
- C. whereas consumers are becoming increasingly attentive to the conditions under which animals are being reared;
- D. whereas rabbit farming has been very hard-hit by the decline in meat consumption in the European Union and the economic crisis in farming and whereas sales prices have fallen by some 20 % in three years, while production costs have remained constant;
- E. whereas account should be taken of the nutritional contribution made by rabbit meat and the role its production plays in family-run businesses, accounting for a significant share of jobs for women in many rural areas where there are few possibilities for livestock diversification;
- F. whereas just as much account should be taken of the welfare of farmers as of animal welfare;
- G. whereas the majority of rabbits are farmed for meat production, with over 340 million rabbits slaughtered for meat every year; whereas rabbit farming represents less than 1 % of the EU's final livestock production;
- H. whereas the rabbit farming sector in the EU faces a steady decline and the figures for 2016 point to a 4,7 % fall in production owing to a consumer trend of declining rabbit meat consumption; whereas the rabbit farming sector operates in global market conditions and does not benefit from direct aid or market interventions under Pillar I of the Common Agricultural Policy;
- I. whereas the EU has a negative trade balance with China with regard to rabbit meat; whereas 99 % of rabbit meat imports into the EU originate from China; whereas Chinese producers will out-compete EU farmers, with adverse animal welfare implications, if no action is taken;
- J. whereas it is both important and necessary to achieve and maintain profitable rabbit production so that it can continue to help preserve the rural fabric and employment, particularly for women, in areas where other types of production are not possible, as well as continuing to offer varied, high-quality food to consumers;
- K. whereas the European Union is the prime producer of rabbits in the world, ahead of Asia and particularly China, which, producing 417 000 tonnes of carcasses, is the biggest exporter;

- L. whereas rabbit farmers and the sector as a whole have an interest in ensuring that rabbit breeding in line with the European production model continues to uphold the highest standards in the world with regard to food safety, animal health and welfare and respect for the environment;
- M. whereas European rabbit farming is based on the coexistence of different production systems, and whereas rabbit farming is an important way of diversifying the income of many small farms throughout the territory;
- N. whereas, with a mean consumption of 1,70 kg per inhabitant, rabbit meat is one of the least consumed meats in the Union (between 1 % and 2 % of all meat consumed);
- O. whereas there are grave concerns regarding the poor welfare, high stress levels and high mortality and morbidity rates of farm rabbits in Europe, as already concluded by EFSA in 2005; whereas the housing, feeding, genetics, health aspects and optimisation of the emotional state of rabbits kept for farming purposes are vital questions for stakeholders involved in rabbit farming, especially with regard to maintaining animal health and welfare;
- P. whereas, since their domestication, the majority of rabbits in the EU are usually kept in battery cages, which can – and often do – vary from country to country in terms of their specifications;
- Q. whereas the rabbit, like other species that coexist with humans, keeps elements of its natural behaviour, and further research therefore needs to be carried out on measures and conditions that can be implemented during rearing to ensure that rabbits are able to maintain their natural behaviour as far as possible, provided that this has a positive impact on their own health;
- R. whereas, for the purposes of intensive farming, breeds of rabbit which grow quickly and early – formerly called ‘meat rabbits’ – are used, in particular commercial hybrids used on industrial breeding farms for the production of meat animals;
- S. whereas organic production systems where fattening rabbits are kept in group pens with access to a small area of pasture and more space overall are a possible alternative to battery farming, although such group housing systems may pose problems in relation to negative social interactions and aggressiveness among the animals, causing lesions that affect their health and welfare and an increase in diseases transmitted through the oro-faecal route;
- T. whereas some national rules on organic production advocate that rabbits be raised in group pens equipped with access to a small area of pasture at the base of the pen;
- U. whereas, as in the case of other species such as poultry, research could be undertaken into alternative production systems, including organic production systems, that can offer consumers a wider range of food products and have hitherto been developed only to a limited extent;
- V. whereas, having regard to the above, further research should be carried out on the challenges and opportunities of group housing systems;
- W. whereas the sector’s low level of economic significance in the EU represents a strong

disincentive for research and innovation aimed at improving rabbit health and welfare;

- X. whereas there are minimum EU standards for the protection of pigs¹, calves², laying hens³ and broiler chickens⁴, as well as the general Council Directive for the protection of animals kept for farming purposes⁵, but there is no specific EU legislation on minimum standards for the protection of farmed rabbits; whereas increasing numbers of consumers and citizens across the EU are asking for regulation and better welfare for farm rabbits;
- Y. whereas the ban on the conventional caging of laying hens under Directive 1999/74/EC is now in force and has for the most part been successfully transposed in the Member States;
- Z. whereas some Member States have national legislation and legal requirements for rabbit farming and have developed guides of best practice in collaboration with the sector; whereas in 2012 Austria banned the keeping of rabbits in cages for meat production and Belgium has legislation in force that aims to phase out battery cages and replace them with park systems by 2025;
- AA. whereas the European Animal Welfare Strategy argued that existing legislation should be fully implemented before introducing more legislation, and that the development of guides to best practice should be encouraged;
- AB. whereas, considering the demand for a transition to alternative production systems and given the modest economic weight of rabbit farming in European animal production, the Member States and the Commission should be encouraged to undertake further research in the areas of rabbit health, welfare, rearing, housing, nutrition, behaviour and stunning;
- AC. whereas EFSA's Scientific Opinion of 2005 on housing and husbandry systems for farmed rabbits recommended increases in cage size, lower maximum stocking densities for growing animals and therapeutic interventions, including the use of additives to reduce disease;
- AD. whereas the recommendations of the OIE's Terrestrial Animal Health Code on animal slaughter, including methods of stunning and knowledge requirements for operators, apply to rabbits;
- AE. whereas Article 3 of Council Directive 98/58/EC on animal welfare requires 'all reasonable steps' to be taken to ensure the welfare of animals, and Article 4 defines standards for keeping animals in terms of 'established experience and scientific

¹ Council Directive 2008/120/EC of 18 December 2008 laying down minimum standards for the protection of pigs (OJ L 47, 18.2.2009, p. 5).

² Council Directive 2008/119/EC of 18 December 2008 laying down minimum standards for the protection of calves (OJ L 10, 11.1.2009, p. 7).

³ Council Directive 1999/74/EC of 19 July 1999 laying down minimum standards for the protection of laying hens (OJ L 203, 3.8.1999, p. 53).

⁴ Council Directive 2007/43/EC of 28 June 2007 laying down minimum rules for the protection of chickens kept for meat production (OJ L 182, 12.7.2007, p. 19).

⁵ Council Directive 98/58/EC of 20 July 1998 concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes (OJ L 221, 8.8.1998, p. 23).

knowledge', which includes standards laid down by EFSA and the OIE;

General remarks

1. Notes that rabbits in the EU are usually reared in conventional unenriched cages, a barren environment that only has a drinker and feeder and which does not meet the conditions for optimal farming according to the latest scientific findings; also notes that rabbits are sometimes exclusively fed on pellets, without access to fibrous material, and that the close confines of barren wire cages can lead to abnormal behaviour;
2. Notes that further scientific research is needed into housing systems which could promote health quality and limit the risk that animals may become diseased or infected;
3. Acknowledges that alternatives to cage farming of rabbits are being successfully implemented, such as park farming or hutch systems, with grass as the main feed, which improve the comfort and welfare of farmed rabbits; considers that alternative systems should be developed, improved and encouraged whilst recognising that demand for rabbit meat from such systems could to some extent be limited by the impact of additional production costs on the price charged to the consumer;
4. Encourages the use of collective park systems for rabbits because they allow more generous living space, permitting social and locomotive behaviour; points out that the use of collective park systems improves the welfare of farm rabbits by allowing them an existence more closely resembling their natural state; stresses that animal health also depends on two important farming practices, namely the ambient conditions of buildings and the development of adequate husbandry, bio-security and management practices;
5. Calls on the Member States and the Commission to undertake further research for the purpose of finding the best possible housing systems to improve animal welfare in different types of farming, making it possible to implement improvements to farms whilst at the same time guaranteeing their sustainability;
6. Stresses that all rabbit meat on the EU market must adhere to high food safety and quality standards and animal welfare criteria, including imports from third countries; highlights the dangers of unfair competition from third countries if equivalent standards and criteria are not applied to imports;
7. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to preserve the quality and safety of rabbit meat imports by undertaking thorough controls and inspections when these imports enter the Union;
8. Welcomes the establishment of the European platform on animal welfare and calls on the Commission and the Member States to exchange and highlight codes of practice on rabbit farming;

Rabbit breeding

9. Emphasises that the breeding of rabbits in the EU is highly intensified, although the conditions in which rabbits are bred and kept vary, owing to differences in the aims of rabbit breeding and in consumer requirements between markets and Member States;

10. Points out that cage size varies according to the animals' age and weight and that this influences movements such as stretching out, sitting and standing with their ears erect (a 'lookout' posture typical of the species), rearing up, turning around comfortably and hopping; underlines that this lack of exercise can also lead to weakened bones, stereotypic behaviour and footpad lesions;
11. Stresses that housing systems have improved over time to incorporate new arrangements such as footrests, with the aim of reducing foot lesions and improving welfare; points out, however, that some of the older models of cage used may have an unsuitable design by modern standards;
12. Notes with concern that there is an intrinsically high rate of disease and mortality amongst farm rabbits owing to factors such as higher parasite infection rates (coccidiosis, pinworms, etc.) and susceptibility to infectious diseases such as HDV and myxomatosis;
13. Points out that EFSA concluded in 2005 that the mortality and morbidity rates of farmed rabbits seemed considerably higher than in other farmed animal species owing to enteric and respiratory infections and reproductive problems; notes equally that the same EFSA report warned of the higher risks to rabbit health arising from production on the ground in comparison with cages, specifically owing to coccidiosis and parasite infections;
14. Welcomes the progress made by many producers in introducing improvements to the design of housing systems in line with EFSA's recommendations; expresses its concern, however, about the scant amount of treatment and research aimed at tackling diseases among farm rabbits;

Rabbit rearing

15. Expresses its concern that rabbits reared and fattened for meat production in the EU and kept in old-fashioned cages which do not conform to modern farming requirements are being provided with a space per rabbit that is less than the area of two ordinary A4 sheets of paper;
16. Points out that rabbits are extremely sensitive animals and can suffer from a wide range of welfare problems and diseases caused by inappropriate breeding conditions, including fatal viruses, respiratory diseases and sore hocks from sitting on wire-mesh cage floors;
17. Points out that few therapeutic tools are available to rabbit farmers and veterinarians to tackle the health problems that arise and that more efforts are needed to tackle lack of research and investment in medicines for treating minor uses and minor species;
18. Notes also that nutrition has a high impact on animal welfare and animal health, and therefore considers that rabbits should have permanent access to a balanced diet with proper fibrous doses;
19. Notes, nevertheless, that health risks are limited thanks to very strict EU health rules and stresses that under legislation in force (Directive 98/58/EC) sick animals should immediately receive medical treatment, accompanied by isolation of the animal during its convalescence or followed by euthanasia if necessary;

20. Recognises the importance of providing training courses for people involved in all aspects of animal handling in rabbit farming, and good practice guides based on reliable technical and scientific analyses, in order to improve their performance and understanding of the relevant animal welfare requirements and thereby avoid unnecessary suffering for animals;
21. Points out that rabbits weaned for fattening and does kept in alternative collective park systems, which typically provide 750 cm²/rabbit for growers and 800 cm²/rabbit for does, benefit from more space for movement, social interaction and play, and that platforms in collective park systems allow rabbits to avoid aggressors by getting out of the way, with separate housing for does when they are nursing a litter;
22. Acknowledges that such systems will cause farms to incur costs, which needs to be taken into account by providing financial assistance to farmers who opt for this system for raising rabbits; invites the Commission to support the rabbit farming sector in future EU budgets; notes that financial support is available under rural development programmes to support those farmers who apply animal welfare measures that improve the welfare of rabbits;
23. Points out that any compulsory measure initiated will have to be backed up by the budget necessary to support rabbit breeders; also maintains that a specific heading should be included for the purpose of promoting the consumption of rabbit meat;
24. Underlines that more research into the group housing of does would benefit their welfare, in particular with regard to the time during which does have to be kept in separate housing and when to subsequently reintroduce them into the group;
25. Advises that male rabbits over 12 weeks of age which are kept for breeding should always be housed separately in any system, owing to problems of aggression;

Transport and slaughtering

26. Points out that transport is a stressful experience for rabbits; underlines that rabbits should be fed and watered before long-distance transport and be provided with adequate food, water and space in transit, and that transport times should be as limited as possible, owing to the sensitivity of the species; emphasises that there are a huge variety of stress factors that affect animal welfare such as heat, starvation, dehydration, pain and trauma, cold, motion sickness and fear;
27. Stresses that the welfare of farm rabbits during transport and slaughtering also depends on the attitudes and handling procedures used by farmers, hauliers and abattoir personnel, as well as the transport logistics; calls on the Commission to monitor the implementation and enforcement of the relevant EU legislation, especially Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport;
28. Stresses that rabbits should be fully stunned before slaughter, ensuring that they undergo no suffering, pain or stress; recalls that slaughter must be carried out without risk of the stunned animal regaining consciousness in line with Council Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing; recalls that the development of practical research into stunning techniques used on other species would make it possible to establish electric or other stunning methods, such as stunning with a mixture of gases, appropriate to the specific characteristics of rabbits, which may be

commercially viable as well as more humane;

Antimicrobial resistance

29. Recognises the efforts of European producers to reduce the use of antibiotics in rabbit farming; stresses that the widespread use of antibiotics in rabbit farming, especially in intensive types of farming, can lead to an increase in antimicrobial resistance;
30. Notes that strong reliance on antibiotics can lead to an increase in antimicrobial resistance, making it vital to move towards more responsible use; takes the view that rabbit farming is part of this situation alongside other animal production sectors and that it must also make a significant effort to promote responsible use of antibiotics in order to maintain efficacy and to prevent antimicrobial resistance;
31. Emphasises that in order to reach and maintain high standards of hygiene in all farming systems, mainly by means of the development of preventive measures and targeted checks, Member States should be encouraged to gradually phase out the use of conventional battery cages across the EU, whilst promoting economically viable enriched farming systems;
32. Stresses that antibiotics must be used only for treatment purposes and should be followed by the appropriate withdrawal period before slaughter in accordance with Regulation (EC) No 470/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council on residue limits of pharmacologically active substances in foodstuffs of animal origin, in order to guarantee that rabbit meat is safe;
33. Emphasises that reducing the use of antibiotics, and the positive impact that this will have on public health, can only be achieved if stronger emphasis is placed on the management and monitoring of rabbit farms;

Conclusions

34. Encourages the Commission, in the light of the high number of rabbits being farmed and slaughtered in the EU and the severe animal welfare implications of the systems currently used for keeping rabbits, to draw up a roadmap towards financially sustainable minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits; emphasises that this roadmap should contain measurable milestones with regular reporting, and, in chronological order, should consist, as a minimum, of:
 - the drafting of guidelines containing good practices and establishing animal welfare rules for rabbits in cooperation with all those involved in production and other stakeholders in the rabbit farming sector,
 - a Commission Recommendation, taking into consideration existing national measures, containing, where appropriate, proposals for a common EU approach, in particular with regard to rabbit health, welfare and housing,
 - within an appropriate timeframe, a legislative proposal on minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits;
35. Invites the Commission to use scientific evidence and findings as the basis when proposing measures for housing requirements for breeding does and for rabbits reared

for meat production, giving due consideration to the biological needs of the animals and their species-specific behaviour for such housing requirements;

36. Believes that the requirements in Articles 3 and 4 of Directive 98/58/EC for ‘all reasonable steps’ to be taken for animal welfare and defining standards in accordance with ‘established experience and scientific knowledge’ should be used to enforce the scientific recommendations on rabbit welfare laid down by EFSA and the OIE;
37. Points out that a balance must be kept between the various aspects to be taken into consideration, as regards animal welfare and health, the financial situation and working conditions of farmers, sustainability of production, environmental impact and consumer protection; points out also that account must be taken of consumer needs for affordable, high-quality rabbit meat;
38. Stresses that the CAP’s aim is to supply agricultural and food products to consumers across the EU whilst taking into account their needs and wishes for healthy and high-quality agricultural and food products at affordable prices;
39. Encourages the Member States and the sector to create clear systems of production labelling and to make use of labelling schemes as laid down in Chapter V of Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the provision of food information to consumers, to ensure greater market transparency, uphold quality standards and protect consumer health, thereby allowing consumers to make informed and transparent purchasing choices, while highlighting the provenance of the product and protecting it from unfair competition;
40. Stresses that all existing rules should be harmonised at EU level; underlines that exchanging information for the purpose of drawing up good practice guides and support of national guidelines are crucial to this process;
41. Encourages all Member States to bring their provisions into line with the existing rabbit welfare provisions laid down by Austria, Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom, in the interests of a level playing field;
42. Acknowledges the need for further scientific research into rabbit farming, considering the demand for a transition to alternative production systems; encourages the Member States and the Commission to give dedicated budgetary support to and undertake research into:
 - health of farm rabbits,
 - welfare of farm rabbits,
 - housing for farm rabbits,
 - breeding of farm rabbits, including breeding of rabbits from genetic strains with calmer temperaments,
 - rearing of farm rabbits,
 - behaviour of farm rabbits,

- nutrition for farm rabbits,
 - species-specific diseases, morbidity and mortality of farm rabbits,
 - appropriate medicinal products, vaccines and treatments for farm rabbits, taking into account the increasing problems of antimicrobial resistance,
 - appropriate species-specific humane stunning methods for farm rabbits;
43. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to provide data on rabbit meat production and trade and to include rabbit meat in the European Meat Market Observatory;

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44. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.