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THE SCIENCE ON ANIMAL TRANSPORT

A SHORT NOTE ON JOURNEY TIMES

The European Commission's Scientific Veterinary Committee (SVC) looked at transport in detail in 1992 and concluded that "*live transport should be avoided whenever possible*". They stressed that "*the occurrence of poor welfare can be reduced considerably by slaughtering near the point of rearing and transporting meat*".

More recently, in March 2002, the European Commission's Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (SCAHAW) produced a major report on animal transport in which they reviewed the scientific literature on this subject. The SCAHAW report stressed that after a few hours of transport, welfare tends to become poorer as journey length increases and so concluded that "*Journeys should be as short as possible*". It emphasised that "*With increasing duration of journey, the welfare of animals generally gets worse because they become more fatigued, incur a steadily increasing energy deficit, become more susceptible to existing infections, and may become diseased because they encounter new pathogens.*"

In the light of their concerns about welfare becoming poorer as journey length increases, the SCAHAW recommended that a maximum overall limit of 8 hours should be placed on the transport to slaughter of pigs, horses, calves aged less than 6 months and lambs of 20 kg. or less. The SCAHAW recommended that a maximum limit of 12 hours should be placed on the transport to slaughter of sheep and cattle.

In an Answer dated 18 June 2001, Commissioner Byrne stressed that "*the necessity to limit the long distance transport of animals to absolutely essential journeys ... [is an] especially important objective for the Commission*". We totally agree with this.

CIWF wishes to stress that with all animal transport it is important to avoid high temperatures and high stocking densities.

Calves

As regards calves, a review (1995) of the scientific literature by Dr Toby Knowles of Bristol University, stated that *“Evidence from the literature suggests that young calves are not well adapted to cope with transport and marketing, often suffering relatively high rates of morbidity and mortality, both during, and in the few weeks immediately following transport Comparatively few normal calves actually die during transport but they succumb, usually within four weeks, to secondary disease as a consequence of their inability to respond appropriately to transport”*.

Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) believes that calves should not be transported at all until they are about 2 months old as calves are delicate and, because their immune system is not well developed, vulnerable to disease.

Adult cattle

The SCAHAW reported that food and water deprivation of 14 hours results in vigorous attempts by cattle to obtain food and water.

Cattle prefer to stand during transport. They avoid lying down (i) because, being heavy animals, they get bruised by banging against the hard floor during transport and (ii) because of the danger of being trampled by the other animals. However, they find the effort of standing is tiring and quite demanding and so after 16 hours they begin to lie down. This indicates that after 16 hours they are fatigued.

Pigs

The scientific evidence shows that pigs are particularly poor travellers. They are especially vulnerable to travel sickness – vomiting – and can begin to suffer from dehydration after just 8 hours. The SVC said that *“Pigs are likely to get motion sickness during road transport”*. Their report concludes that *“It would be best for the welfare of slaughter pigs for transport to be as short as possible”*.

A major review (1998) of the scientific literature by Paul Warriss of Bristol University concludes that *“the transport of pigs is an inherently stressful procedure”* and that the impact of the stress can be reduced by limiting the length of journeys. The review identifies journey length as one of the factors which influences welfare and points to evidence of greater mortality with longer journeys.

The SCAHAW reported that after 8 hours of transport pigs ate and drank immediately after arrival at a lairage.

Pigs are monogastric animals and, unlike ruminants, have no reservoir of food and water to help them cope with long journeys.

Sheep

The major piece of research on sheep transport (by Knowles and others from Bristol University) in 1996 concluded that *“From a welfare point of view, transport distances and times should be kept to the minimum”*. It adds that *“This study and previous work show that transport is a stressful process involving psychological and physical stress”*. The researchers point out that long journeys can result in increased levels of disease and mortality. One study shows that after 14 hours transport, sheep take up to 144 hours to fully recover from the journey.

The SCAHAW reported that after 12 hours of food deprivation, sheep are very eager to eat.

Cull ewes are very vulnerable as they are likely to be weak or diseased before the journey begins. The transport of cull ewes should be kept as short as possible. In many cases they should be euthanased on the farm and not transported at all.

Horses

Horses are nervous, flighty and fragile animals. The SCAHAW reported that transporting horses for over 12 hours greatly increases the risk of them developing shipping fever. Horses require food and water more frequently than ruminants.

Conclusion

Scientific research usually looks at animals being transported in good conditions. The hard reality is that in practice many animals being transported across the EU are carried in appalling conditions. The paper on sheep transport by Knowles and others warned of the dangers of only looking at animals transported in good conditions. They stress that: *“These results [i.e. the ones that led them to conclude that transport distances and times should be kept to the minimum] were obtained with healthy, well fed sheep, transported under optimum conditions by an experienced haulier. The transportation of unfit animals, transportation without adequate ventilation or at a stocking density at which the animals would be unable to lie down comfortably could lead to much more severe changes and the welfare of the animals would be at much greater risk”*.

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