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LEGISLATIVE CHANGES CONCERNING THE PROTECTION OF PIGS

MINIMUM STANDARDS AND PROGRESSIVE HUSBANDRY

The European Union (EU) has prohibited some of the worst aspects of factory farming and is – slowly – beginning to introduce a more humane, sustainable agriculture.

Of vital importance is the 1997 legally-binding Protocol on Improved Animal Protection. This recognises that animals are "sentient beings", not just agricultural products. The Protocol also requires the EU and the Member States, when formulating and implementing EU policies on agriculture, to pay **"full** regard to the welfare requirements of animals".

As regards pigs, in 2001 the EU adopted a new Pigs Directive which will usher in important reforms.

Ban on sow stalls and tethering

The tethering of sows was banned by the 1991 Pigs Directive; this ban comes into force in 2006. The new Directive – crucially – prohibits sow stalls as from 2013. When using the term "sow stalls" I am referring to the stalls which are so narrow that

the sow cannot even turn round. Traditionally, sows are kept in these stalls throughout their 16½-week pregnancy. And for pregnancy after pregnancy. In short, for most of their adult lives.

I am disappointed that, even after 2013, farmers will still be allowed to keep sows in these stalls for the first 4 weeks of their pregnancy. Nonetheless, the Directive will lead to huge welcome changes as it insists that, after the first four weeks of pregnancy, sows must be kept in groups. CIWF is campaigning for the EU Directive to be strengthened so that stalls are banned throughout the pregnancy.

Prohibition of fully slatted floors

Nor will it be possible to keep group-housed sows in fully slatted, barren environments. Under the Directive, the sows must have permanent access to straw or some other manipulable material, and part of the floor must be solid. The Directive provides that from 2013 each sow must be given at least 1.3 m^2 of continuous solid floor and each gilt at least 0.95 m^2.

The Directive also lays down minimum space allowances, stipulating that when kept in groups each sow must from 2013 be given at least 2.25 m^2 and each gilt at least 1.64 m^2 of unobstructed floor area. I believe this figure should be higher, with each sow being given 3.5 m^2.

All the provisions which apply to existing farms from 2013 apply much earlier to new farms – from 2003.

Preventing aggression in group-housed sows

I am aware that some producers fear that group-housing can lead to aggression at feeding-time and when new animals join the group. Scientific research and practical experience have, however, established that aggression can largely be prevented.

Firstly, it is essential to use a feeding system which is designed to minimise competition for food. For example, in a group-housing system, food can be scattered into the straw by 'dump-feeders': these are automated dispensers fitted near the ceiling. The sows then root around busily for their meal. This keeps them occupied and so helps prevent aggression. Alternatively, feeding can be done by hand with food being scattered amongst the straw. This, too, promotes foraging among the sows which again helps prevent aggression.

Yet another way of avoiding competition, is the trickle feeder system, whereby food is delivered a little at a time into individual feeders. Providing the food in a slow trickle discourages a sow from eating her meal quickly and then trying to steal food from others.

Finally, the electronic sow feeding (ESF) system can be used. A computer transponder attached to her ear allows the sow to enter a feeding station which is locked behind her to protect her as she feeds. The computer recognises each animal individually and can give a feed ration tailored to her needs.

Also important in preventing aggression is giving sows a sufficient quantity of bulky food; this prevents hunger which can otherwise lead to aggression.

Aggression can also be avoided by keeping the group as stable as possible – sows must be returned to the same group after farrowing and new animals should only be brought in when necessary.

Environmental complexity is another factor in avoiding aggression – the sows must be given access to soil for rooting or manipulable material such as straw.

Finally, giving the sows sufficient space is an important factor in preventing aggression.

Economics of sow stall ban

There are also fears that the ban on sow stalls will lead to a sharp increase in costs. In fact, in their 2001 report, the European Commission pointed out that, as regards investment, some forms of group-housing are actually cheaper than sow stalls. The Commission added that overall costs – that is, including both building and running costs – are also lower in some group-housing systems than with sow stalls.

Moreover, data from France, the Netherlands, the UK and Denmark all show that even in the better group-housing systems – ones giving reasonable space and ample straw – a kg. of pigmeat costs just 3 EU cents more to produce than in sow stalls.

As EU consumers each eat on average 42 kg. of pigmeat a year, the ban on sow stalls will add – at most – just over 1 Euro a year to each person's food bill.

Hunger in sows

I turn to the problem of hunger in sows. In their 1997 report, the EU's Scientific Veterinary Committee stressed that pregnant sows are usually given much less food

than they would choose to consume and "so the animals are hungry throughout much of their lives".

In this context I welcome the Directive's requirement that from 2003 pregnant sows must be given enough bulky or high-fibre food to satisfy their hunger – and their need to chew.

One Dutch farm we have visited has overcome the problem of sows not being able to satisfy their hunger from standard meals of concentrated feed. Here the feed is specially formulated to include vegetable pulp, making it more bulky and so more satisfying. Straw, too, can add bulk to sows' diet. Feeding bulkier food helps prevent hunger which can otherwise lead to aggression.

Fattening pigs

So far I have been talking about the breeding sows. I want to turn now to the fattening pigs – the pigs reared for their meat. The vast majority of the EU's fattening pigs are factory farmed. They are kept indoors throughout their lives in severely overcrowded, barren, often filthy sheds. Most are given no straw or other suitable material; they are kept instead on bare concrete or slatted floors. Most are tail-docked, even though routine tail-docking is already illegal under EU law.

Straw

Far reaching reforms are needed to these inhumane systems. The Annex to the Pigs Directive agreed last year will begin the process of reform. Under the Annex, fattening pigs – and indeed sows and boars as well – must from 2003 be given permanent access to a sufficient quantity of material to enable proper investigation and manipulation activities. The Directive requires the use of material such as straw,

hay, wood, sawdust, or mushroom compost. I warmly welcome this provision, as some of the worst welfare problems affecting factory farmed pigs arise from their inability to carry out natural rooting, exploratory and foraging behaviours.

One approach to the provision of straw is the "straw-flow" system. The floor of the straw-covered lying area is set at a slight slope. This causes the straw bedding to move slowly through gravity to a central dunging passage. The lying area therefore virtually cleans itself, so cutting down on the amount of labour needed. Trials also show success in housing fattening pigs on wood chips.

Tail-docking

Also welcome is the Annex's strengthened ban on routine tail-docking. The new law provides, again from 2003, that before carrying out any tail-docking, farmers must take other measures to prevent tail-biting such as lowering stocking densities and changing inadequate environmental conditions or management systems.

I should add that both scientific research and practical experience show that the right way to prevent tail-biting is not to dock the pigs' tails but to improve their conditions. The key factors involved in a strategy to prevent tail-biting include:

?? providing straw or some other manipulable material; this allows the pigs to engage in their natural rooting or exploratory behaviour

?? providing sufficient space to prevent overcrowding

?? avoiding poor air quality in pig buildings, such as high levels of dust, ammonia and carbon dioxide

?? addressing dietary deficiencies, particularly of salt and phosphorus

?? both aggressive pigs and badly bitten pigs should be removed from the group.

Space allowances for fattening pigs

The 1991 EU Pigs Directive lays down minimum space allowances for fattening pigs. It provides that each weaner or rearing pig kept in a group must be given at least the following unobstructed floor area:

Live weight, kg	m^2
Up to 10	0.15
Over 10 up to 20	0.20
Over 20 up to 30	0.30
Over 30 up to 50	0.40
Over 50 up to 85	0.55
Over 85 up to 110	0.65
More than 110	1.00

To my disappointment, the 2001 Directive failed to introduce better space allowances despite the fact that in their report the EU's Scientific Veterinary Committee suggested that the 1991 Directive's minimum space allowances for fattening pigs should be increased by about 50%. We will campaign strongly for fattening pigs to be given more space when the Directive is reviewed in 2005.

Castration

Similarly, castration must be prohibited by the EU – the Scientific Veterinary Committee stressed that "castration causes severe pain and distress". Castration is in practice only rarely carried out in the UK and the Republic of Ireland and has been banned in Norway as from 2009. Moreover, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany,

Denmark and Sweden are discussing a ban on piglet castration. They have set up a scientific working group to research the issue with the aim of producing an action plan ahead of the review of the EU Directive in 2005.

The EU Directive provides that where castration or tail-docking is carried out after the seventh day of life, it must be performed under anaesthetic and additional prolonged analgesia by a veterinarian.

Teeth-clipping

The Directive prohibits routine teeth-clipping. However, when there is evidence that injuries to sows' teats have occurred, the Directive permits a uniform reduction of corner teeth not later than the seventh day of life, leaving an intact smooth surface. The EU's Scientific Committee has condemned teeth-clipping, stating that: "It seems unlikely that the causing of pain in every tooth of every piglet could be justified by the relatively minor advantages which occur [from] the practice".

Healthier animals produce economic benefits

Improvements for fattening pigs need not be as costly as is often feared. Indeed, research shows that better welfare can produce healthier animals and thus economic benefits. Healthier animals lead to savings through reduced expenditure on veterinary medicines and lower mortality rates. Healthier animals can also have improved growth rates and better feed conversion ratios.

Conclusion

The EU Directive is introducing some important and welcome reforms. Much, however, remains to be done to dismantle the factory farming of pigs in Europe and to achieve pig husbandry which is truly humane.

In particular, I believe sow stalls should be prohibited throughout the sow's pregnancy (their use should not be permitted even during the first 4 weeks of pregnancy), more space should be given to fattening pigs and castration should be banned. In addition, although the farrowing crate is beyond the scope of this paper, I wish to make it clear that I believe it should be banned and replaced by systems that allow the sow to move around and perform nesting behaviour while at the same time giving proper protection to the piglets.

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