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Animal Welfare Labeling - European Commission Report

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Report Highlights:

On October 28, the European Commission published its long awaited report outlining a series of policy options for animal welfare labeling. The report also considers the possible establishment of a European Network of Reference Centers for the protection and welfare of animals. The Network would provide technical support for the development and implementation of a variety of animal welfare policies including labeling and certification. The stated objective of both initiatives is not to raise animal welfare standards as such but to increase consumer understanding of animal welfare and provide an incentive to producers to increase the welfare of animals. The report does not endorse any of the animal welfare labeling options but identifies legislative and non-legislative options which are considered to be the most feasible at this stage. The findings presented in this report will now form the basis for an in-depth debate between the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament.

General Information:

COMMISSION REPORT ON ANIMAL WELFARE LABELING

Commission Report

In October 2009, the European Commission published a report outlining a series of animal welfare labeling options. The overall goal of this report is to begin developing policy in this area is to help consumers identify animal welfare-friendly products and at the same time provide producers with an economic incentive to improve the welfare of animals. The report examines to what extent the current legal instruments are achieving this goal, how they can be improved and whether new instrument should be introduced.

The report does not endorse any of the options but aims at facilitating a political discussion between the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council. The report also suggests setting up a European Network for Reference Centers for the protection and welfare of animals. Neither initiative is intended to raise animal welfare standards as such.

To help prepare its report, European Commission's DG SANCO [1] commissioned a study to assess the feasibility of various legislative and non-legislative labeling options. The feasibility study carried out by an external contractor and the outcome of two consumer surveys ("Eurobarometer" surveys) revealed that animal welfare information on food products is a key issue for consumers. Current EU legislation establishes minimum animal welfare standards but does not set out harmonized requirements for the labeling of animal welfare standards or how to assess them. The report examines some of the private labeling schemes which exist at national level and raises the question whether an EU level labeling scheme similar to the easily identifiable EU organic logo could be justified.

Labeling Options

DG SANCO is examining the possible development of an animal welfare labeling system which would harmonize the internal market and prevent the multiplication of private labeling schemes which all use different standards to define "welfare". The report explores both mandatory and voluntary animal welfare labeling options such as the introduction of "reserved terms". "Reserved terms" are expressions such as "free-range" or "indoor intensive" used to describe the production method. The mandatory use of "reserved terms" already exists in the EU for the marketing of table eggs. The production system under which the eggs are obtained must be indicated on the label as "eggs from caged hens", "barn eggs", "free-range eggs" and "organic eggs" and can be interpreted by the consumers as an indicator of animal welfare. Optional "reserved terms" are laid down in the EU's marketing standards on poultry meat which clearly define farming method indications and the conditions for use.

The report also looks at the international dimension of animal welfare labeling. Voluntary labeling schemes are permitted under WTO law provided that they are proportionate and open to third countries. A mandatory labeling scheme would face more controversy in the WTO framework because of its implications for third country partners and their ability to adapt. Under the EU's WTO commitments, a third country product complying with EU production requirements should be eligible

to use any EU quality scheme.

Mandatory labeling options outlined in the report are:

- Mandatory labeling of the welfare standards under which products of animal origin are produced.
- Mandatory labeling of the farming method under which products of animal origin are produced using “reserved terms”.
- Mandatory labeling of compliance with EU minimum standards or equivalents.

Voluntary labeling options outlined in the report are:

- Establishment of requirements for voluntary use of animal welfare claims.
- Establishment of a voluntary EU Animal Welfare Label open for all to use if they meet the criteria.
- Drafting of guidelines for animal welfare labeling and quality schemes.

European Network of Reference Centers for the Protection and Welfare of Animals (ENRC)

As the validity and reliability of existing animal welfare indicators is often disputed, stakeholders have indicated that there is a need for scientific and transparent validation of farming systems. In this context, the European Commission is assessing the feasibility of different options for establishing a European Network of Reference Centers (ENRC) for the protection and welfare of animals. The ENRC could provide technical support for the development and implementation of animal welfare policies such as labeling and certification. The Commission’s preferred option is to designate an existing center of excellence on animal welfare to cooperate with a network of recognized research institutions in the Member States. The ENRC should be independent from outside interests, cover all areas of animal use and complement (not duplicate) current activities by other EU bodies.

Next Steps

The Commission report is the first step in assessing the impact of different policy options and its main purpose is to start an in-depth inter-institutional discussion on animal welfare labeling. Any concrete proposals that may result from the political debate will be subject to further impact assessments. Legislative proposals establishing EU-harmonized rules would need to be adopted under the co-decision procedure [2]

Background

In May 2007, the Council adopted conclusions inviting the Commission to assess the issue of animal welfare labeling in all its aspects and to submit a report in order to allow an in-depth debate on the subject. Two “Eurobarometer” surveys (2005-2006) revealed that there is a demand from consumers for more information on animal welfare on food products. The Commission’s “Community Action Plan for Animal Welfare 2006-2010” also describes the provision of animal welfare information to the

general public as one of the main areas of action. More recently, in the context of the agricultural quality policy debate, the European Parliament called for an EU logo to show that food is produced to high quality, environmental and animal welfare and health standards.

Links

- [Commission Report “Options for animal welfare labeling and the establishment of a European Network of Reference Centers for the protection and welfare of animals”](#)
- [Commission working document “Summary of the impact assessment report”](#) and [“Impact assessment report”](#)
- [Feasibility study – Part 1 “Animal welfare labeling”](#)
- [Feasibility study – Part 2 “Community Reference Center”](#)
- [Eurobarometer surveys 2005-2006](#)
- [May 2007 Council conclusions](#)
- [Community Action Plan for Animal Welfare 2006-2010](#)
- [European Parliament draft report on agricultural product quality policy](#)

^[1] SANCO: Health & Consumer Protection

^[2] Under the co-decision procedure, the Council and the European Parliament have equal legislative power. If the two institutions cannot agree on a Commission proposal, it is put before a Conciliation Committee. Under the Treaty of Lisbon, the co-decision procedure will be renamed the “ordinary legislative procedure”.