

Dear Commissioners,

European Union (EU) legislation protecting farmed fish welfare

Compassion in World Farming EU, calls upon you to protect farmed fish in the European Union. The current revision of EU animal welfare legislation, to bring it in line with the latest scientific evidence and to improve animal welfare, would be wholly incomplete without including farmed fish in its scope. We urge you to take this opportunity to introduce much needed and long overdue legislation to ensure good fish welfare during all aspects of fish farming.

It is estimated that up to 1.3 billion farmed fish were killed for human consumption in the EU during 2017, comprising a range of species¹. Yet, despite the ever-mounting evidence of fish sentience², and the substantial numbers involved in aquaculture, fish are currently not well protected by European legislation; they are covered only very generally by European legislation regarding farmed animals:

- Farmed fish are included within **Council Directive 98/58/EC** concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes. This states that member states shall make provision to ensure that the owners or keepers take all reasonable steps to ensure the welfare of animals under their care and to ensure that those animals are not caused any unnecessary pain, suffering or injury³.
- Farmed fish are included within **Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005** on the protection of animals during transport and related operations, which applies to all vertebrates and states that no transport of live animals is permitted if it is likely to cause injury or undue suffering⁴
- Farmed fish are included within **Council Regulation (EC) 1099/2009** on the protection of animals, at the time of slaughter that stipulates “[a]nimals shall be spared any avoidable pain, distress or suffering during their killing and related operations” (p. 9). However, fish are excluded from the rest of the recommendations⁵.

This legislation is very poorly enforced in relation to fish, mainly owing to the lack of detailed recommendations applied to them. In contrast, legislation for farmed land animals is more extensive and there are specific Directives for some species (e.g. pigs, broiler chickens, laying hens, calves). Fish are only covered in very broad terms in the above-mentioned regulations and one general Directive, so there appears to be limited practical application and compliance is hard to define.

In practice there are huge welfare issues in aquaculture. For example, inhumane slaughter practices are widespread, exposing fish to prolonged periods of intense suffering. All EU countries are members of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), and therefore all member states should be following OIE guidelines in the absence of more specific legislation regarding fish. The European Commission recently used the OIE guidelines on fish slaughter⁶ to assess compliance with Council Regulation (EC) 1099/2009. Overall, they found a lack of compliance; the use of stunning methods was inconsistent even though stunning systems are commercially available for many species⁷. They also found that it was not possible to ascertain effectiveness of stunning equipment used in member states, where it is not manufactured by major producers known to have worked with research

institutes to verify the machines. Therefore, it should not be left to member states to follow voluntary guidelines to safeguard fish welfare. Meanwhile the aquaculture sector is growing rapidly worldwide. Relevant, more readily enforceable legislation specific to fish is urgently needed.

Animal welfare is of increasing concern to European citizens and consumers are becoming more aware of aquaculture, of the methods used and the welfare of the animals involved. In a 2018 survey, 79% of European citizens said that fish welfare should be better protected than it is currently, and that the welfare of fish should be protected to the same extent as other animals eaten by humans⁸. Improving fish welfare also provides an opportunity to improve the product quality which has further benefits to consumers and producers⁹.

We recognise the progress made in recent years with fish welfare gaining some recognition as an important issue in the EU policy arena. In 2020 the EU Platform on Animal Welfare, an expert group established by the Commission, published best practice guidelines on water quality and handling for the welfare of farmed fish. Additionally, for the first time there was a dedicated section on animal welfare in the Strategic Guidelines on Sustainable and Competitive Aquaculture, published by the European Commission. We welcome these steps, but with the revision of EU animal welfare legislation there is now the opportunity to build on this momentum and make real progress for farmed fish.

All farmed fish would benefit from humane slaughter, gentle handling, conditions that provide good water quality, and environments that meet their physical, mental and behavioural needs. Farmed fish welfare legislation is crucial to ensure these needs are met during rearing, transport and slaughter; it should be comprehensive and include (but not be limited to) the areas outlined below.

Requirements for good welfare during rearing

- Require that fish are kept in enriched systems which meet their species-specific physical, mental and ethological needs, including their requirements for: shelter, substrate, water current, light/dark periods, social grouping.
- Limit stocking densities to prevent overcrowding, aggression and risk of poor water quality, and allow space for natural behaviour and preferred social grouping.
- Define water quality parameters including temperature, oxygen, pH etc.
- Require gentle handling techniques to reduce stress such as requirements for moving fish in water (i.e. pumping).
- Require that fish are fed on a suitable diet that meets their nutritional needs according to the species and life stage. Restrict use of fasting periods to only when essential and in any case for no longer than is required for fish welfare benefits.
- Restrict breeding practices to prevent the breeding of animals likely to experience poor welfare.
- Prohibit mutilations.
- Promote practices to ensure good health and lower disease risk.

Requirements for good welfare during transport

- Transport of live fish should be avoided where possible but where necessary, transport time should be minimized and only healthy fish, fit for the journey, can be transported.
- Require that handling during loading and unloading should be minimized and as gentle as possible.
- Specify requirements for specific transport methods so that each type of vessel/vehicle is well-designed to provide a safe environment to transfer fish and allow for appropriate welfare monitoring and inspection during transport. Method of transport: Design and constructions

of vehicles: Vessel/truck etc details (well boats, helicopter, trucks etc. each having different rules)

- Ensure that water quality and temperature parameters are closely controlled and monitored and stocking densities must be sufficiently low to avoid deterioration of water quality, and additional oxygen should be available in case of delays.
- Require suitable measures are taken to ensure biosecurity.
- Require appropriate fish welfare indicators to be included in documentation (journey logs).

Requirements for humane slaughter

- Ensuring that all farmed fish are killed using humane slaughter methods.
- Providing species-specific requirements on permitted methods of stunning and killing.
- Banning slaughter methods which are known to cause suffering for all species, such as exposure of conscious fish to ice slurry, air or carbon dioxide.

However, there are also important species differences that would further benefit from specific requirements where scientific knowledge is available. Species-specific annexes for key farmed species should be provided in addition to the general requirements, with room for further annexes to be added when possible. We understand that the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has been given a mandate to research species-specific requirements for welfare of salmon, trout, carp, sea bass, sea bream, European eel and tuna. We highly encourage the Commission to widen the scope to include turbot and catfish, as those species are the sixth and seventh most numerous farmed species in the EU. Additionally, we strongly urge the Commission to request more timely completion dates, given the importance of this work and the number of animals that will be affected by its delivery. And in the first instance, we encourage a roadmap to lay out planned dates for implementation of species-specific annexes.

In conclusion, currently the protection afforded to fish farmed in the EU is much weaker than that given to farmed terrestrial animals. As part of the Farm to Fork strategy however, there is an opportunity to change this. There is increasing public concern about fish welfare and support for protective legislation is gathering. We urge the Commission to give farmed fish welfare the attention it urgently requires during this important welfare legislation reform.

We offer our full support and assistance in this matter and would be grateful for the opportunity to meet and discuss this with you further.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Olga Kikou

Head of CIWF EU

Compassion in World Farming International

References

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