Animal welfare: How to make it paw-sible
The European Commission is currently reviewing the EU’s animal welfare legislation, which is being undertaken within the framework of the EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy.

In doing so, the EU executive aims to align an almost unchanged legislation from 2009 with the latest scientific evidence, broaden its scope, make it easier to enforce and ultimately ensure a higher level of animal welfare.

While the European Commission’s health and food safety division, DG SANTE, is undergoing an ambitious impact assessment that could see the end of cages or a limit in the transport of live animals in the EU, a number of concerns over lack of funding and socio-economic sustainability of such proposals remain.

In this Event Report, EURACTIV dives into some of the tensions among stakeholders and potential solutions on how to improve animal welfare standards.
Commission: EU cannot give up on animal welfare even if unaffordable

Expert: Future animal welfare standards must include positive indicators

Animal health, a prerequisite for animal welfare
The ‘moral choice’ of decoupling animal welfare standards from productivity is the biggest question right now, according to the Commission’s head of animal welfare. And while stakeholders say they are willing, they say they need more funds to do so.

The European Commission is currently reviewing the EU animal welfare legislation within the framework of the EU’s flagship food policy, the Farm to Fork strategy.

The proposal, expected to be unveiled in September, is currently undergoing an impact assessment of the different policy options at the disposal of the EU executive, as previously reported by EURACTIV.

The leaked assessment shows a tendency toward following recommendations from the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA), whose recent scientific reports

Stakeholders showed overall willingness to the possibility of renouncing to higher productivity to raise animal welfare standards, but consider that the EU needs to provide more funding to compensate farmers. [SHUTTERSTOCK]
conclude – for example – that cage-free systems are most effective in terms of animal welfare.

It also indicates that the Commission is acknowledging growing citizens’ calls to raise and uphold animal welfare standards, such as the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) ‘End the Cage Age’.

“There is a clear demand by the European citizens to keep the [animal welfare] standards at the pace of the scientific and technological revolution,” Andrea Gavinelli, head of animal welfare unit at the Commission’s food safety service (DG SANTE) said at a recent event in Brussels.

“[Animal] welfare was non-existent compared to today if I think about what was the dialogue between the parties of the past,” he added, “so this answers the fact that it is getting frontline.”

But, according to Gavinelli, the “question on the table today” is the ‘moral choice’ of whether the EU will be “brave enough” to decouple this revision from economic sustainability and productivity.

“I cannot answer myself because the dynamic is sophisticated and will come from a process that is also political,” he added.

According to Duffy, this means – for example – paying farmers to return on investment, taking into consideration the size of the farm, or national bodies “simply providing the funds to do that”.

She also added that there has been “very little uptake” by member states of the funding available under the previous CAP for animal welfare.

“I don’t believe it's a lack of goodwill on the part of farmers,” she said, adding that the priority should be shifted to having systems with better animal welfare and providing the finance and the opportunities to actually be able to put those things in place.

However, vice-president of the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe, Mette Uldahl, also pointed out that, in addition to giving incentives, the EU needs to “be careful that we don’t decide too much and then we don’t enforce it”.

She insisted that, for example, the “really good decision” of imposing regular vet visits “still needs a lot of implementation.”
A growing ‘change of philosophy’ in animal welfare is studying how to promote positive indicators – such as satisfaction – instead of simply preventing animals from having negative experiences, according to expert Antonio Velarde.

The main animal welfare indicators used in scientific research and decision-making are the so-called ‘five freedoms’: freedom from hunger and thirst, freedom from discomfort, freedom from pain or disease, freedom to express normal behaviours, and freedom from fear and distress.

However, according to the head of the Catalan Institute of Agrifood Research and Technology (IRTA) Antonio Velarde, recent research has demonstrated the importance of also considering positive welfare.

“It is a change of philosophy in welfare,” he said, “now the idea [...] is not only to avoid problems, but to promote positive welfare [for the animal].”
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As he explained, indicators for positive welfare are “on the way” but still less developed than others.

“For example, the indicators of pain, suffering or frustration have been studied a lot, so we already know when an animal suffers and we have tools,” he said. “But the indicators of positive welfare – that would be when [the animal] plays or when it is satisfied – we still have to develop them more.”

Science, according to Velarde, is “a fundamental part of protecting animal welfare” because it brings knowledge, such as quantifiable indicators, to be able to make decisions that protect animals.

The expert, who is also a member of the animal health and welfare panel of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), responded to the livestock sector’s reticence to their scientific opinions by explaining that their recommendations are supposed to be the ‘starting point’ of new legislation, but not the end.

“I think they [EFSA’s opinions] have had reluctance, but above all because they have been misinterpreted,” he said.

As the EU’s scientific body, EFSA has been publishing scientific opinions in the framework of the ongoing revision of animal welfare legislation.

Amongst its recommendations to the Commission include the adoption of cage-free systems for certain species, as well as the prohibition of mutilation practices and long journeys of live animals.

“It was from the welfare point of view,” he said, “if we didn’t have economic or environmental problems, what would [the animal] need?”

“And then you have to look at how you can combine it with the other aspects,” he explained.

**Leaps and bounds**

According to Velarde, the ‘ideal’ future scenario will be that “everything is automated and you have a computer that tells you: look, there is a welfare problem here”.

Despite acknowledging that science and technology are advancing “by leaps and bounds”, he believes there is still a long way to go to achieve this dream.

“While we may have sensors that can assess [the animal’s] activity, growth or body condition, then the challenge is [...] how to evaluate it so that it tells you something about welfare.”

According to him, it is important to make progress on establishing “where the limits are” and how to “interpret the information and the data that we receive”.

He added that, right now, the information from – for example – geolocators, is being collected by the companies themselves.

However, “maybe, in the long run, a cloud can be formed with all that data that can be evaluated, and it can certify the welfare of your animals,” he said, adding that “it is also in the interest of companies to make it public so that they can promote it.”

Along the same lines, Velarde assured that “animal welfare can be a business strategy” that can also “benefit the employer”.

“I think the trend is not to produce cheap meat, but to produce sustainable meat,” he said, adding that “maybe it is not necessary to produce so much meat, but of better quality.”
In the highly polarised and often emotional debate around animal welfare, there are a number of sectors developing concrete solutions to deliver on demands for higher welfare for farm animals. One such sector is the animal health industry.

Roxane Feller is Secretary General at AnimalhealthEurope

With animal health recognised as being essential for animal welfare in the EU Regulation on Transmissible Animal Diseases, also known as the Animal Health Law, and with health indirectly referenced in the internationally recognised principles of animal welfare known as the ‘Five Freedoms’ – in the freedom from pain, injury and disease parameter – it is clear that without good health, Europe’s animals won’t experience a positive life before entering the food chain.

The basic but essential tools in the veterinary toolkit, therefore, play an important role in maintaining high standards of animal welfare. Vaccines and parasite protection provide the means to prevent disease and discomfort in both livestock and aquaculture. And when bacterial infections strike, antibiotics can treat disease and anti-inflammatories can relieve any painful symptoms. Increased use of diagnostic tools is also helping to ensure that the right diagnosis is given early on so that the appropriate treatment options can be given to quickly remedy illness and restore good welfare.

As science develops in the field of animal welfare, with many scientists and animal welfare academics now...
referencing the ‘Five Domains’ of animal welfare – similar to the freedoms with health as a parameter and an additional focus on the mental state – so too are animal health-care offerings developing. In some countries, an increasing number of consumers wish to know that the food they consume has come from animals that have had a good life, and new animal health technologies developed over the past years are helping to ensure greater insights into animal care as well as greater traceability.

Today’s animal health monitoring tools are helping farmers to keep a closer eye on each and every animal. The use of sensors via ear tags or smart collars on the animals, or via video cameras and microphones in the barn can capture signs of ill health or discomfort, such as: irregular feed consumption; a high temperature; an abnormal movement or gait; or even respiratory abnormalities. Using algorithms, the data captured via the sensors send an alert to the farmer's smartphone or computer programme so that appropriate care can be given. Sometimes this can facilitate the detection of an infection before the full onset of the illness, or it can help stop an issue from getting worse.

Ill-health can be the result of a complex combination of factors. Some are intrinsic, such as genetic makeup. Some are external, such as living space, food, or contact with wildlife. Some are environmental, including extreme weather pressures or the presence of air or water-borne diseases. The right conditions can of course help minimise the risk of disease, but they can never prevent it completely. This is why animal welfare requires training in good animal husbandry practices including biosecurity, and access to veterinary support and animal vaccines, medicines and other healthcare tools.

Farmers have a duty of care towards the animals they raise, making sure they are safe, well-fed, comfortable, not stressed and healthy. But we know this is not the only thing they have to manage, as farmers have growing demands also to protect biodiversity, restore soil health and decrease emissions, as well as to ensure a safe and secure food supply for the population, all while trying to balance production costs and make a living for their families. This is why the animal health industry is investing in such new technologies and expanding the toolkit for veterinarians, farmers and other animal guardians. With more connected health and welfare parameters, we can support more holistic animal management, greater traceability and better welfare overall.
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