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COMMUNICATING MODERN ANIMAL FARMING

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A communication gap between citizens and farmers in the modern livestock sector is increasingly widening and the general sentiment is shifting from an overall good opinion of those who keep feeding the world toward a negative view on farmers' role in today's society.

According to livestock sector stakeholders, this communication gap is leading to misinterpretation of the reality of animal farming, if not intentional disinformation and the sector is making efforts to avoid or mitigate unpleasant effects like the so-called agri-bashing and violence against animal growers.

Some criticism is well-founded and there is a general consensus on the need to reconsider all aspects of modern animal farming in order to better address animal welfare and environmental issues.

But breeding practices are already changing in this direction. The next challenge is how to better communicate these changes to the general public and bridge the gap between farmers and citizens.

Contents

.....

EU livestock sector hits back at criticism
on animal farming 4

Animal health the biggest challenge
in livestock farming, researcher says 6

'Climate Change' and 'Animal Welfare'
cannot be reduced to simple slogans 8

EU livestock sector hits back at criticism on animal farming

By Gerardo Fortuna | EURACTIV.com



[SHUTTERSTOCK]

Over a dozen livestock stakeholders have been campaigning across metro stations in Brussels as well as online, in a bid to fight back against the narrative propagated by NGOs and environmentalists on animal farming. At stake is the very conception of modern animal farming practices in Europe.

The situation had originally turned sour when environmentalist groups and animal welfare NGOs started to accuse the livestock sector of killing the planet with environmentally unfriendly industrial farming, and

of killing citizens with an unhealthy overconsumption of meat products, in addition to the suffering that animals experience as part of the industry.

However, a multi-stakeholder group in the livestock food chain are not bowing to this narrative and have started a campaign “to restore balance.”

The campaign European Livestock Voice brings together sectors ranging from animal health to breeding and provides an online platform with FAQ-format information on livestock in Europe.

And since all is fair in love and war, the campaigners have presented the

platform by claiming that practices including disinformation, fake news, myths and stereotypes on livestock farming, have been spread on social media and in the press.

Call it meat pride or name it as you like, the main goal of the campaign is to try and tell the other half of the story, addressing the threat of a ‘livestock exit’, as they call the potential phasing-out of animal farming in Europe.

The focus is, indeed, on the consequences of opting for a livestock-free scenario, highlighting what Europe would be missing out from,

Continued on Page 5

Continued from Page 4

starting from the social and economic contribution of the sector to the rural areas.

Campaigners want to catch up on the communications gap they think was created as the animal farming sector did not handle the transition from an industrial society to an information society well.

“Maybe the agricultural sector has not been very good at informing others what they were actually doing,” a campaigner explained.

FRESH FACES

Alexander Bernhuber is a 27-year-old farmer in Austria elected for the first time as an MEP with the Österreichische Volkspartei, affiliated to centre-right Europe's People Party (EPP).

Surprisingly, he decided to sit in Parliament's Environment, not Agriculture Committee and, indeed, in his words, he always points out farmers' role in coping with environmental issues.

“Personally, I strongly support a regional, European meat production, as it guarantees safety to our farmers but it is also a real solution in the fight against climate change,” he said during the launch event of the online platform.

He described livestock as “a lifeline” providing jobs and income in rural areas, but at the same time, he noticed an increasing information gap between consumers and producers.

“Nowadays the challenge is to communicate the nutritional, economic and environmental benefits of livestock farmers to consumers,” he said.

Another fresh face is Jérémy Decerle, a newly-elected MEP who is also a breeder of Charolais kettle in France.

He tried to draw the attention on the dangers of the steady agri-bashing that the livestock sector is facing at the moment, mentioning the case of three poultry houses burnt down in Normandy some weeks ago.

“We must remember that farmers are feeding our citizens and that is unacceptable to see such increased violence against them,” he said.

He also highlighted the need to include animal farming in international negotiations, as it is more and more difficult to manage competitiveness from the global market.

“We have to take animal farming seriously, trade is not just about Mercedes,” he said.

HIGH ON THE AGENDA

Livestock farming and particularly animal welfare are important topics for the next EU Agriculture boss Janusz Wojciechowski, who in the past has chaired the European Parliament's intergroup on the welfare and conservation of animals and has conducted an audit on animal welfare during his days as EU auditor.

During his hearing, Green MEP Francisco Guerreiro asked if he agreed

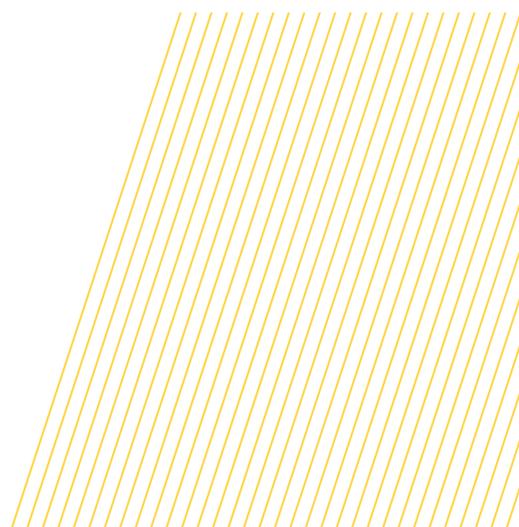
on the need for a new animal welfare strategy, with the Polish saying that the most effective system is to encourage farmers to improve animal welfare standards through voluntary actions.

He also spoke about less density in animal farming, as well as less summer grazing.

“I will support this kind of farming and I agree it is better to have 1,000 farms with 100 pigs than one farm with 100,000 pigs,” he said. “It's better for the environment and for many other things.”

First vice-president of the Commission Frans Timmermans was recently questioned about the issue of prioritising the quality of meat products over the quantity, during his hearing at the European Parliament.

“This is something that came from farmers themselves, it is not something we have to impose to them,” answered Timmermans.



INTERVIEW

Animal health the biggest challenge in livestock farming, researcher says

By Gerardo Fortuna | EURACTIV.com



Improving animal welfare could go in the wrong direction in term of environmental risks and there is a new line of research to cope with this problem, said the French expert. [SHUTTERSTOCK]

Even more than climate change, animal welfare will be the main challenge for the future of livestock farming and will prompt a rethink of the entire system around the health of animals, a French farming researcher told EURACTIV.com.

Jean-Louis Peyraud is assistant scientific director at the French National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA and President of the European Platform Animal Task Force.

He spoke to EURACTIV's agriculture

reporter, Gerardo Fortuna.

A multi-stakeholder group in the livestock sector claimed there is increasing disinformation about animal farming. What's an example of livestock fake news, if there is one?

When there is some kind of misunderstanding of reality. For example, when people claim that it takes 15,000 litres of water to produce 1 kilogramme of meat. It is not wrong, but we need to consider that 95-96% of this water is just evapotranspiration from plants. So, it's rainwater otherwise used to clean buildings, not for human consumption.

Do you think this misinterpretation is genuine or intentional?

Sometimes it is pure misinterpretation, sometimes it is to push an economic or social interest. For instance, it is true that livestock has some negative impacts in terms of greenhouse gas emission, but people from the vegan movement use this argument to push their philosophy against killing animals for meat

Continued on Page 7

Continued from Page 6

because humans and animals are at the same level.

And I'm sure, although I have no direct proof, that a lot of industries use this kind of argument to develop their own plant-based products. In this way, they can take advantage of the fact that livestock is under pressure as a form of good advertising, just by saying they can produce foodstuffs to replace animal products and this will be better for society.

But still, there are concerns about intensive livestock. How do you see this practice in terms of sustainability?

Indeed, intensive livestock raises more issues than extensive animal farming. But I have no definitive verdict on this practice because, to some extent, it is thanks to the intensification of farming that a lot of people now can eat meat and dairy products at a reasonable price.

We don't remember that people after World War II did not eat enough meat. So, the intensification of the system has some good aspects, but there are also bad ones regarding animal welfare and the environment.

Can we change it? I wish I say I hope so, but in some countries, especially in the north of Europe, there's not much room for the extensive system, as there is not enough land. That's a political and economical problem, we need to think about the future of livestock keeping in mind that we have a huge diversity in Europe.

Do you think the opinion on farmers is changing in our society?

Farmers used to live in a world where they were considered able to feed the world or the European population at least. Now, their position in society changed from a good to a bad one and not only in livestock farming, as the debate on pesticides shows.

The situation is getting worse because people living in the cities know less and less about livestock and crop farming, while farmers don't know how to explain the evolution of their practices. The citizens see that there is a problem, but there is a huge distance between the vision of the population on what farming should be and what is the reality from the farmer side.

What role can the media sector have?

Communication of science is very complicated and communicating the real world is complicated as well. When you are in the media, you have one minute or less to tell your truth. So, it's about saying something is black or white, not light or dark grey. And we cannot say that livestock is black or white, good or bad: it is much more complicated than this.

But it seems there is a clash between livestock stakeholders and journalists who are accused of spreading fake news...

I think that "clash" is a very strong word and I hope we don't reach this extreme. But even in the scientific world, there is a lot of debate on it. I have some colleagues at the INRA who are sure that we need at least to reduce drastically or even to suppress livestock farming.

But it's not a problem when it happens in a debate between scientists. The problem is when the debate appears in the media and the arguments are very biased. To be honest, I partially understand the vision of some NGOs claiming that we need more reasonable livestock farming system.

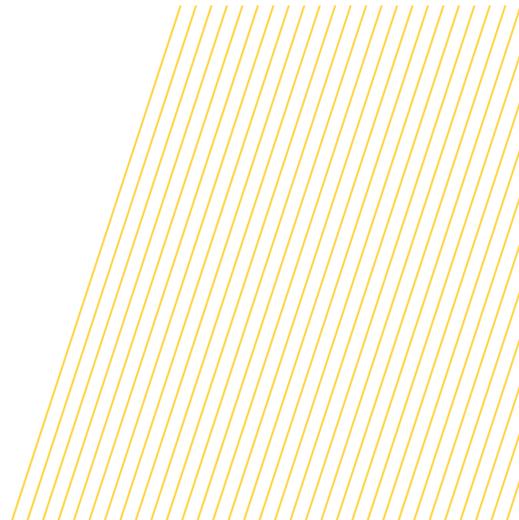
We should change our intensive farming to improve animal welfare, for instance. But how we can reach this without destroying our economic food chain? We don't know how to go into this direction so far.

You mentioned animal welfare, what's the situation in this regard?

It is better in Europe than in the rest of the world, but we need to make more progress. I think animal welfare is the main challenge for the future of livestock farming, even more than climate issues.

We need to conceive a new farming system around the welfare and the health of the animals and the farmers. But we should reconsider the system in a rational way, as to some extent, improving animal welfare goes in the wrong direction in term of environment.

Putting pigs outside, as some NGOs claim, will increase some environmental risks. There is a completely new area of research on this aspect and as President of the European Platform Animal Task Force, I will push this line of research in the next Horizon Europe.



OPINION / PROMOTED CONTENT

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'Climate Change' and 'Animal Welfare' cannot be reduced to simple slogans

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By European Livestock Voice



[European Livestock Voice]

There has never been a shortage of polarisation in the debate over farm animals, but when the livestock production debate was connected to climate change the polarisation turned into stigmatisation.

European Livestock Voice is a coalition of different animal sectors

with offices in Brussels. You can find more information about it on <https://meatthefacts.eu/>.

All of a sudden a strong discourse arose directing people to feel guilty, not only for producing meat, but even for eating it, and of course demands like 'sin taxes' on animal products were quick to follow.

The story is presented in black and white. There is a right and a wrong, and we are to understand that our planet's health and basic human morality, calls for a dramatic, if not total, reduction in livestock production.

While emissions or other impacts

Continued on Page 9

Continued from Page 8

of livestock should neither be, nor are they being ignored, there are significant flaws in today's public debate over livestock. Both climate change and animal welfare are complex societal and ethical issues, but in the hands of some interest groups this complexity is reduced to simplistic but very catchy slogans. When that happens, we are at risk of losing sight of the original goal.

Take animal welfare campaigns like 'Wool is Cruel', 'Meat is Murder' and 'End the Cage Age', for example. In an instant animal welfare can be summed up in three or four words, and another eminent moral 'wrong side' is presented matter-of-factly to the public. However, it is far from this simple. Taking the cage reference as an example, although there are plenty of good reasons to associate free-range housing systems with good animal welfare, it is not always the case: mortality amongst egg-laying hens is for example higher in free range systems than cage systems. If scientific knowledge is to guide our ethical decisions, and animal welfare indeed is the goal, livestock production practices cannot be reduced to a simple matter of free-range or not.

Likewise with the climate debate. Replacing animal products with plant-based alternatives is not the universal solution to climate change. Such simplicity wipes away a number of other important environmental aspects like biodiversity, our rural fabric and landscapes and ethical considerations, for example food supply and security, also for developing countries, the importance of valuable nutrients like animal protein in our human diets, cultural activities, or the inherent circularity of upcycling hides and skins to leather or natural textile fibres, which are long-lasting alternatives to fast fashion textiles based on plastic.

With no intention to contribute further to the already polarised image of 'rights and wrongs' on our dinner plates (most of us who eat meat indeed also like vegetables!) it is also relevant to point out that vegetarian diets are not environmentally neutral either. A kilo of nuts for example requires twice the amount of fresh water required to produce a kilo of chicken, and although livestock may have a higher environmental impact than vegetables and other plant products the example still serves the purpose of illustrating that the climate debate is far from simple.

Yet, if our ultimate goal is a reduction in greenhouse gasses, and we otherwise accept the premise of people eating food, it is commonly acknowledged that the by far most effective way to do so is to replace fossil fuel energy sources with green alternatives. This is what we could call picking the lowest hanging fruit, even if this is not particularly well reflected in the public debate. We might add to this perspective that livestock excels in green energy sources like biogas and biofuels.

Moral pluralism is a precondition for our free liberal societies. The nature of values is that people have different moral opinions and, more often than not, these are contradicting each other. Viewing both animal welfare and climate change through a critical livestock perspective is perfectly legitimate, but we find that the livestock debate has come to a point where values are promoted as facts, and myths or prejudices about livestock are readily fuelled by interest groups with a simple yet effective narrative: for economic gains alone, and against a backdrop of animal neglect, animal agriculture is to be blamed for climate change.

European Livestock Voice, a coalition of different animal sectors with offices in Brussels, have come together to do exactly what the name suggests: to create a voice for those

actually involved in livestock and to restore some balance in debates over important societal issues like animal welfare and climate change. It is evident that old values sometimes must give room to new values, but when and if they do it is in society's interest that this happens on a factual basis. It is likewise important that complex ethical issues are treated like complex ethical issues. This would for example imply that animal welfare cannot be reduced to perhaps a well-meaning version of 'animal justice', but must be considered in the context of all stakeholders with an interest at stake. While a 'sin tax' on animal protein may seem like a simple solution to climate change, it will also contribute immensely to human economic equality, which too is a relevant ethical issue. A qualified democratic debate can never be simple. And when it comes to policy-making, debates and discussions must be based on science and facts.



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