

Reports and Comments

Overview Report on the welfare of animals exported by sea

The EU exports a large number of cattle and sheep to the Middle East and North Africa by sea. In recent years, on average, over half a million cattle and two million sheep made these journeys annually, leaving the EU from exit ports in Croatia, France, the Republic of Ireland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Spain. The welfare of animals transported by sea in the EU is regulated by the EU legislative framework Regulation (EC) No 1/2005. It encompasses provisions for livestock vessels, loading of animals and administrative duties.

In March 2020, Directorate-General Health and Food Safety (DG Sante) of the European Commission published its Overview Report on the Welfare of Animals Exported by Sea. It summarises the primary strengths and weaknesses of the processes currently in place to protect the welfare of sheep and cattle travelling from the EU to third countries (ie those not within the EU), via livestock vessels, for commercial agricultural purposes.

The Report covers conditions experienced by animals travelling by road to EU exit ports, time spent at these ports and official checks performed there. It also includes the official controls of livestock carrier ships (capacities of up to 75,000 sheep or 18,000 cattle). The Report was primarily compiled using data collected during a two-year project by the Directorate for Audits and DG Sante. Additional information was gathered from a range of sources including national authorities, NGOs, EU Member States and a multi-country workshop held in 2019.

The authors state that transporting animals by sea is not inherently cruel, but the findings indicate many animals do suffer. Multiple failings throughout the system, which is designed to safeguard the welfare of animals, are highlighted. Specifically, at ground level, the competence of

staff performing checks on livestock vessels comes under scrutiny. In all ports, with the exception of those in the Republic of Ireland and Portugal, the lack of staff qualifications, practical experience and technical knowledge leads to animals undergoing journeys during which their welfare is severely compromised, eg basic needs such as feed, water and thermal regulation going unmet, to the worst case scenario: vessels containing live animals capsizing. Ultimately, culpability for these failings lies with those in the upper levels of the hierarchy — the Member States' competent authorities. In particular, support for the veterinary officials trying to protect animal welfare at EU exit ports was found to be sorely lacking. Veterinary staff frequently contend with pressure from industry, and need more backing from their superiors, when rejecting consignments due to concerns regarding animals' fitness or vessel suitability. Further resources should be made available to allow personnel to adequately fulfil their roles.

As a result of this work, the European Commission has made recommendations to Member States in order to improve the welfare of animals undergoing international transport. The authors acknowledge their reporting on conditions during sea transport, arrival at destination ports and onward journeys in third countries, is lacking due to the sparse amount of data available. Accumulation and disclosure of such data would be welcomed, as it is vital to have a comprehensive overview of the journeys these animals endure.

Overview Report on the Welfare of Animals Exported by Sea (March 2020). A4, 24 pages. The report, which is available in 23 languages, can be found on the European Commission website: https://ec.europa.eu/food/audits-analysis/overview_reports/details.cfm?rep_id=137.

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