Welfare of chickens kept for meat production: decision making process in Brussels

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Brief history of European rules related to animal welfare
The first European rules on animal welfare have been established for intensive animal production systems on the farm: in 1986 the Council adopted rules for the protection of laying hens and in 1991 Directives on the protection of calves and on the protection of pigs. In 1998 a Council Directive (98/58/EC) on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes gave general rules for the protection of animals of all species kept for the production of food, wool, skin or fur or for other farming purposes, including fish, reptiles or amphibians. These rules are based on the European Convention for the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes. They reflect the so-called ‘Five Freedoms’ as adopted by the Farm Animal Welfare Council:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst - access to fresh water and a diet for full health and vigour,
- Freedom from discomfort - an appropriate environment with shelter and comfortable rest area,
- Freedom from pain, injury and disease - prevention or rapid treatment,
- Freedom to express normal behaviour - adequate space and facilities, company of the animal's own kind,
- Freedom from fear and distress - conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

Besides European rules for animals on the farm, rules have been set for the protection of animals during transport and for the stunning and killing of animals before slaughter.

As all rules related to animal welfare on the farm are embedded in Council Directives national governments may adopt more stringent rules provided they are compatible with the provisions of the Treaty of the EU. Currently the Commission is working on specific Directives on minimum standards for several animals, among which minimum standards for chickens kept for meat production (broilers). The several steps in the process until a Council Directive may be adopted are described below.

In November 2004 EU rules related to the transport of animals have been changed and for the first time animal welfare rules are embedded in an EU-regulation instead of a Directive. This implies that the EU-rules related to transport are directly applicable in the EU-member states.

Decision making process
Decision-making at EU level involves a number of institutions, in particular the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. The European Commission initiates legal texts for new legislation but it is the Council and Parliament that pass the laws. Since 1997 DG Sanco (Directorate General for Health and Consumer Protection) is responsible for animal welfare issues. Consequently DG Sanco outlines proposals for regulations and or directives on animal welfare issues. The rules and procedures for EU decision-making are laid down in the Treaties. There are three main procedures for enacting new EU laws: co-decision, consultation and assent. In the case of animal welfare currently the consultation procedure is used. Under the consultation procedure, which is applied for all Council regulations/directives related to animal welfare, the Commission sends its proposal to both the Council and Parliament but it is the Council that officially consults Parliament and other bodies such as the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, whose opinions are an integral part of the EU's decision-making process. Once (if) the European Constitution is adopted the co-decision procedure will be used for decision making on animal welfare issues. This means that the European Parliament and the European Council jointly have to adopt a new Directive of Regulations. The European Commission may decide on implementation regulations/technical details. In relation to animal welfare decisions are made in the Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health (ScoFCAH).
Following several food safety crisis in the nineties DG Sanco has been created and the White Book for Food Safety has been published. The first regulation ensuing from the White Book is the General Food Law, adopted in 2001. The food law aims at ‘ensuring a high level of protection of human life and health, taking into account the protection of animal health and welfare, plant health and the environment’. This integrated "farm to fork" approach is now considered a general principle for EU food safety policy. Most of the changes in food law are related to food safety. However, certain changes affect the decision making process for animal welfare.

New bodies related to animal welfare

The General Food Law provided for the Standing Committee on Food Chain and Animal Health (ScoFCAH) in which representatives of Member States discuss issues in relation to veterinary matters (animal health, animal welfare, public health) and approve urgent measures when necessary. This Committee substitutes a number of former ‘permanent committees’ among which the permanent veterinary committee. Mainly implementation regulations based on Council regulations/directives are being discussed in this committee.

In 2004 an Advisory Group on the Food Chain and Animal and Plant Health has been created. This group is the core in a consultation procedure on the food chain and animal and plant health through representative European bodies. The Commission will consult this group on its programme of work in various fields, including animal welfare.

The General Food Law provides for the compulsory consultation of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA; established as well by the General Food Law) before new European rules related to animal welfare can be initiated. Responsibility for the provision of scientific advice in this field has been transferred to the Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (ScAHAW) of the (EFSA). Before the General Food Law was adopted the European Commission could ask the opinion of the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare. This Committee provided independent advice, but formed part of the European Commission.

Welfare of broilers

Following the adoption of the European Convention of the protection of animals the Commission started the process for establishing future European regulation on broilers. Until now no minimum standards for the production of broilers exist. The Commission will shortly publish a proposal for a new Council Regulation. This (draft) proposal of the Commission for minimum standards for broilers is based on a scientific report published in March 2000. It concludes among others:

- The major welfare problems in broilers are those which can be regarded as side effects of the intense selection mainly for growth and feed conversion (leg disorders, ascites, sudden death etc.);
- The fast growth rate of current broiler strains is not accompanied by a satisfactory level of welfare including health;
- The effects of stockings of stocking density on broiler welfare vary according to the slaughter-age, slaughter weight, ventilation rate or quality of ventilation equipment and the climatic conditions.
- Consequently maximum stocking rates should be specified for particular building and climatic; control capacity. Only when a producer is able to maintain the criteria an increase in stocking rate towards maximum should be allowed;
- Provisions regarding lighting, litter availability, mortalities, foot-pad lesion scoring, staff training should be made;
- Increasing stocking density has been found to reduce behavioural activities;

In 2001, 2002, 2000 and 2004 several stakeholders meetings and meetings with member states have been organised. In March 2005 DG Sanco has brought a draft Commission Proposal into inter-service consultation. This means that several DG’s discuss the proposal initiated by DG Sanco. This might result into a change of the original proposal of DG Sanco. At the moment of writing this note the draft proposal of DG Sanco is still in the inter-service consultation procedure. Once the official proposal of the Commission has been adopted the proposal will be send to the Council and the European Parliament (see paragraph on decision making).
The draft proposal of DG Sanco aims at:

- Harmonise production standards across the EU;
- More stringent requirements for units operating at higher stocking densities (30kg/m² versus 38kg/m²);
- Provisions for litter availability, mortalities, foot-pad lesion score, staff training etc.;
- Integration of animal welfare checks performed at slaughterhouses with on-farm checks and data collection;
- Exchange of information between slaughterhouse, official veterinarian, competent authority, producer and private veterinarian.