

EU wants to improve animal welfare in slaughterhouses

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(BRUSSELS) - The European Commission on Thursday proposed tougher rules for slaughterhouses to ensure that farm animals "are humanely treated" before they are killed.

Each year almost 360 million pigs, sheep, goats and cattle as well as several billion poultry are killed in EU slaughterhouses for meat. Another 25 million animals are killed for their fur, according to official figures.

"As a society we have a duty of care to animals, which includes minimising distress and avoiding pain throughout the slaughtering process," said EU Health Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou.

"The current EU rules are outdated and need revision," she added.

Under the plans no method of stunning and slaughter would be banned, even though some have been identified as being less humane.

For example "the waterbath stunner" for poultry and the use of carbon dioxide will still be permitted as there are not yet viable commercial alternatives, the commission said.

However Brussels wants to make it mandatory for slaughterhouse staff to be properly trained, for technical standards on slaughter equipment to be introduced and for an individual to be responsible for animal welfare in each establishment.

Operators will also have to evaluate the efficiency of their stunning methods.

"After stunning animals will have to be regularly monitored to ensure they do not regain consciousness before slaughter," the commission said in a statement.

Compassion in World Farming policy advisor Peter Stevenson welcomed the proposals but said the commission "has shied away from tackling some crucial issues."

His group took especial aim at the electrified water bath and carbon dioxide gassing methods.

"Scientific research shows that this method causes severe respiratory distress. Pigs can be seen gasping and hyperventilating," it said while the electric bath method "can lead to pain and distress and should be replaced by the use of non-aversive gases such as argon or nitrogen".

Also his rights group and the Belgian Action Group for Animal Rights complained that the measures "will continue to allow animals to be killed without prior stunning for religious slaughter.

"This means that animals have their throat cut while fully conscious -- scientific research shows that this causes great suffering," the groups added in a joint statement.