

Meeting of the sub-group on poultry

Second meeting, 28 April 2022
(Videoconference)

- MINUTES -

Attendance

Independent expert	Leonardo James Vinco Evangelia N. Sossidou
Civil society organisations	Eurogroup for animals (EfA)
Business and professional organisations	AVEC COPA FVE
Member States	Czech Republic Denmark Spain Norway
European Commission	DG SANTE G5 DG SANTE F2
Guest	European Reference Centre for the Welfare of poultry and other small farmed animals - excused EY (External contractor for IA study on kept animals) EPB (European Poultry breeders) EFFAB (Eur. Forum of Farm Animal Breeders) ELPHA (European Live Poultry and Hatching Egg Association)

Topic of the meeting: Develop ways to decrease negative impacts of selective breeding on the welfare of animals

Discussion

According to the agenda, the meeting had been dedicated to the discussion of two topics. Due to time constraints, however, only one topic was discussed:

Topic of the meeting:

Develop ways to decrease negative impacts of selective breeding on the welfare of animals

The chair welcomed participants and the guests from EY, EPB, EFFAB and ELPHA.

The chair informed about a recently signed contract with EY for the development of a study supporting the Impact Assessment of the revision of the legislation regarding the keeping of animals on-farm.

1. SANTE presents currently applicable EU animal welfare requirements for the breeding of animals

The Chair presented currently applicable EU animal welfare requirements for the breeding of animals and some options to address the problem (see attached presentation).

2. Presentation by AVEC together with Denmark and Evangelia Sossidou

The representative of AVEC presented the topic, introducing the views developed together with the representative of Denmark and of E. Sossidou (see attached presentation).

In summary, there exist several alternatives to address possible animal welfare problem, such as, for breeders, to focus on animal welfare traits in breeding programmes and for farmers to install resp. to improve feed-back to the breeding company, to improve farming conditions, and to use a documentary system for each flock.

3. Presentation by EFFAB and EPB

The representatives from EFFAB and EPB presented poultry breeding practices and targets in the EU (see attached). They described the “Code EFABAR”, which is a code of good practices for sustainable animal breeding, developed by the poultry breeders. EFFAB explained that the code commits poultry breeders to responsible and balanced breeding thus to improve health, welfare, production and the global footprint simultaneously. According to the presentation, poultry breeding today is a commitment to balance different breeding goals, including animal welfare.

In summary, EFFAB and EPB expressed their view that the Code EFABAR is a sufficient tool to further improve the situation. The Code is revised every year on the basis of collaboration with research sections and feed-back from farmers and consumers.

Regarding the use of cages, they explained that poultry breeders have been working to find alternatives, with significant improvements. But for several aspects, separation of birds is still needed. Individual cages at Pure Lines level help to maintain genetic diversity, especially in smaller populations. Banning cages at the breeding level would lead to the end of the whole production system for minor species (e.g. quails) or breeds where breeding without cages is not possible today (small populations including backyard flocks).

4. Discussion/ exchange of views

The members acknowledged that there have been **slight improvements** in animal welfare related breeding since the entry into force of EU rules. These improvements concern in particular areas where behaviour is addressed. However, some members still see a problem in selection. A regulation would be a better way to address the issue than a directive.

A member highlighted that a **huge improvement** can be seen since 1998, e.g. in view of perches, litter, feeding times and daylight provisions. Many possible welfare issues can be addressed by adapting farm management practices.

A guest explained that there is a lot of knowledge available in Europe and that breeding work is being done for the whole world. It should be ensured to **keep control** and knowledge on the products in Europe. Legislation should be changed only in minimal aspects or with long transition times as breeding needs **time to adapt**.

A member noted that the importance of **feedback from commercial farms to breeders** is not always clear in those farms. Also, the possibilities that there are indicators used, are not always clear to the public. Therefore, **more communication** on genetic lines and general information to the public were needed as well as more transparency on the commercial level.

Some members recalled the study of **Aarhus University**, showing that a very high level of keel bone fractures in laying hens probably originated in the production of increasingly bigger eggs combined with the start of lay at early age. A “**cost action**” project showed a multi-factorial origin of the problem (<http://www.keelbonedamage.eu/>).

Some members regard **more specific legislation** beneficial. A basic need would be the availability of more proper data, especially on broilers, such as from slaughter plants.

One member pointed out that **the current use of labels** shows that rules on maximum growth rates improve the animal welfare situation. The RCA Broiler Breeds Protocol (Netherlands), for example, addresses animal welfare aspects in order to have more robust animals. This member was of the view that a broad protocol is needed that should also be developed for laying hens not only broilers. Extensive protocols for allowing only certain breeds should be introduced.

Another member declared that even if we go for changing the legislation, we will not throw away the achievements of breeders and the sector. That member stressed that there is a **need for more detailed, clear legislation** with clear criteria and more specific wording on breeding to give a more predictable framework for breeders and basis for controls by authorities. Legislative criteria on what the breeding programmes should focus on are needed, taking into account animal welfare and animal health criteria as well as production criteria (example: feed/hunger: how much feed restriction would be acceptable – to be based on scientific opinion).

A guest explained that one of the traits that breeders focus on is longevity – but this would be contradicted if laying hen welfare would be connected to a certain **maximum number of eggs** laid in a life cycle.

The guest also pointed out that it must be ensured that the **diversity of the breeds** will not be reduced

A member raised the question on the best measurement for breeding improvements: growing time and laying cycle? The member explained that there exist big **differences between good and bad farmers** of up to 10 g/day daily weight gain per bird, which amounts at slaughter age to 560 g difference. As for hens, the member added that there is a difference of 20 eggs at the end of the laying period between good and bad farmers. According to that member, in the UK, improvement of management is the key factor (RSPCA rules). Food pad lesions, bone fractures etc. thus health related indicators would be the way to measure welfare.

Referring to the presented possible alternatives, one member stated that for **broilers**, the first option (maximum genetic growth rate) is not possible since there is not enough capacity for each of the breeds. The 2nd option (**prohibition of certain genotypes**), however, would be a good way forward.

As regards rectification of unclear/ interpretable provisions, this needs to include a definition on who is the breeder and what he/she has to do and which is the stakeholder. In some countries, **breeding and keeping** is the same. The definition from the AHL for ‘breeding poultry’ could be used.

One member expressed the view that the market demands for some products lead the direction of the breeding. An example would be the demand in the Netherlands for slow growing chicken. According to this member, the **legislation around breeding can be very simple if the keeping is well regulated**. The market demands would do the rest. **Robustness** of birds could be measured by mortality/ liveability, food pad status, bone health and behaviour.

In **summary**, the members of the subgroup see the need for improvement of breeding and genetic selection.

5. Overall conclusions and next steps

The Commission reminded that the recommendations of the Council of Europe had been driven mainly by producer's interests while now the animal is more in the centre of considerations. It is important to find a way to best match the interests of all. The Commission therefore **asked the members of the subgroup** to provide (in writing) an analysis of

- what is needed to improve what – as a philosophical approach – keeping in mind that the less we define benchmarks the less we can implement and harmonise;
- obstacles to implementation and progression of standards – apart from economic analysis e.g. on the costs of implementation of measures – as a basis for considerations on the (transition) time needed.

To better see where we stand, we need to identify, analyse, use and communicate data. The Commission therefore asked members to also provide examples of better data monitoring.

A subgroup member replied that when putting requirements there must also be an adequate control system in place. Another member added that an independent trial and research facility would be needed that should, apart from health, also look at behavioural needs. Rules should be simple and more efficient. There is no need to re-invent the wheel if good examples exist (e.g. those of Denmark).

6. Calendar for the next meetings

The third meeting (19 May, 9:30-12:30, virtual) will be dedicated to the topic regarding the phasing out of cages (presentation by EfA).

The fourth meeting (20 June, 14:30-17:30, virtual) will address the 'Five domains' Model' (presentation by EfA).

The Chair thanked all participants for their constructive contributions. The Chair particularly thanked the representatives from AVEC and Denmark and the expert Evangelia Sossidou for their presentation and the representative from EfA for volunteering to give presentations in the upcoming meetings.