

Protection of animals at the time of killing

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The Commission presented a report on the possibility of introducing certain requirements regarding the protection of fish at the time of killing.

Farmed fish are covered by Council Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing. However, only the general provision in Article 3(1) is applicable to farmed fish, i.e. animals shall be spared any avoidable pain, distress or suffering during their killing and related operations.

In addition, Article 27(1) of the Regulation requires that the Commission shall submit to the European Parliament and the Council a report on the possibility of introducing certain requirements regarding the protection of fish at the time of killing taking into account animal welfare aspects as well as the socio-economic and environmental impacts.

The purpose of this report is to comply with Article 27(1) of the Regulation.

The report also constitutes one of the actions listed in the EU strategy for the protection and welfare of animals 2012-2015.

For the main fish species farmed in the EU the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in 2009 published several opinions on the welfare aspects of the main systems of stunning and killing. These opinions demonstrated that challenges exist in the aquaculture industry with regard to maintaining good fish welfare at the time of killing. Using a risk based approach, the main hazards identified were:

- handling or handling related procedures (e.g. crowding, pumping, time out of water)
- water quality in holding tank/pen
- stunning and killing methods.

EFSA concluded that many of the methods and much of the equipment in use then resulted in **poor fish welfare**. For this reason EFSA proposed certain recommendations, both for the pre-slaughter and the stunning and killing operations. It was also emphasised that opportunities for development of new methods for stunning or killing, for all of the fish species assessed, were considerable.

To assist with the preparation of this report an independent study report by a selected external contractor was commissioned in 2016. The study focused on the five main farmed fish species in a number of selected EEA countries in order to provide a general presentation of the current situation in European aquaculture:

- Atlantic salmon (cold-water marine);
- common carp and rainbow trout (freshwater);
- European sea bass;
- gilthead sea bream (Mediterranean marine).

The international standards of the OIE on animal welfare during transport and stunning and killing of farmed fish for human consumption were used as a benchmark for assessment of welfare practices.

Main conclusions: overall the general requirements contained in Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009 applicable to the welfare of fish at slaughter have contributed to the development of a framework in terms of national legislation and guidance for the welfare of farmed fish in the EU particularly for Atlantic salmon.

The level of achievement of OIE standards at slaughter varies with the species considered.

For **Atlantic salmon**, best practices are mostly achieved, with a few exceptions, in the case-study countries.

For **common carp and rainbow trout**, the level of achievement varies between methods used.

For European sea bass and gilthead sea bream, OIE standards are not achieved in the case-study countries.

The economic analysis shows that differences in production cost are mainly caused by the structure of the industry, with particular benefits from economies of scale. Where such scale economies exist, improving welfare practices is likely to have only a small impact on the cost price, whereas for smaller farms the impact is likely to be much greater. Other factors, such as feed, labour and operating costs are responsible for most of the larger variations between enterprises and countries.

In the specific case of larger Atlantic salmon and rainbow trout farms, it was found that investment in improving welfare could lead to labour savings, and may outweigh the investment cost.

The commissioned study report findings have also shown that the **industry as a whole is gradually but continuously improving fish welfare** as evidenced by the increasing use of more humane methods such as electrical stunning, the phasing out of others such as CO₂ stunning, and the adoption of private standards. However, **improvements are still needed** in order to increase welfare of some fish species, such as the European sea bass and Gilthead sea bream.

The Commission considers that the evidence suggests that it is not appropriate to propose specific requirements on the protection of fish at the time of killing, taking into account that the objectives of the Regulation may equally be achieved by **voluntary measures**, as evidenced by the improvements introduced by industry in recent years. In view of these ongoing developments the Commission concludes that if further guidance is required this would be best achieved at **Member State level**. In any event the **Commission will continue to monitor progress in this area**.

However, it has also to be recognised that there is a need for **further research** aimed to **tailor dedicated systems** for those fish species where the development of more effective techniques is necessary.

The Commission therefore considers it essential to develop further stakeholder dialogues in order to favour specific initiatives and projects in this field that could be mutually beneficial both from an economic and animal welfare point of view.

Against this background the Commission has formulated a more **systematic and visible format for this dialogue**, through the EU Platform on Animal Welfare. The primary objective of this platform is to allow interested parties (animal welfare organisations, scientists, veterinarians, farmers, food processors, food retailers, etc.) an opportunity to express their concerns, share knowledge and resources to build common activities.