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Dods EU | Briefing | Intergroup for Animal Welfare - Webinar: The EU import of horsemeat from overseas

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Dods - Debate Summary



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Anja Hazekamp, MEP, The Left, the Netherlands , opened the webinar said that the import of horse meat from overseas in the EU is a crucial topic. Report from various sources, including NGOs, reveal that horses are systematically neglected and mistreated. Animals of unknown origin, even stolen, are slaughtered for exports to the EU. The EU has already suspended horse meat imports from Brazil and Mexico following audits carried out by the Commission. Repeated audits in other countries have identified similar animal welfare and food safety issues. Three months ago, more than 30 MEPs have tabled written questions regarding the malicious import of horse meat from Argentina. However, the Commission has not given answers yet. It is time for the Commission to impose the same measures against all countries that do not fulfil import conditions. She then gave the floor to Mr Celotto.

Investigation into Horsemeat Production in Australia - Animal Welfare and Traceability Issues

Elio Celotto, Campaign Director, Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses (Australia) wished to discuss horse meat production in Australia and animal welfare issues related to it. Race horses are the primary source of horse made for human consumption that is exported to the EU. There are two slaughterhouses for this purpose in Australia. Brisbane in Queensland is the main exporter and the focus of this presentation. In some cases, horses are transported over distances exceeding 2000 km and 30 hours of transport without being unloaded and without water. If a horse is injured or becomes ill during transport, there is not the ability to treat him or remove it from transport. Some horses sustain serious injuries during transport, while others do not make the trip. Many horses are kept at assembly centres until it is time to be sent to slaughter – there is no veterinary care and only minimum shelter. At this point, the horse is just a commodity. Inevitably, some will die on the property. At the assembly centres there is little

to no grass or shelter. In a 2 year-investigation which took place between 2018-2019 it was found that more than 57% of all horses were racehorses, of the racehorses which were scanned, 9.7% had raced in the previous 30 days, 27.7% in the previous 6 months and 15% of all horses were former racehorses who had raced in the previous 6 months and were very likely to have drug residues present. The horse vendor declaration form is required by law as evidence that the horse has been drug-free for six months, however they are easily falsified. This demonstrates that the current laws are not protecting consumers and pose a significant health risk. This has been acknowledged by the EU, who in a final report on audit in June 2019 wrote "Indeed the recommendations regarding traceability of previous audits have not been properly addressed, in particular concerning the reliability of the medical treatment declarations included in the HVDs. The system of traceability is not able to guarantee that the horsemeat is free from drug residues." There are also many other issues, one being the treatment of horses at the abattoir. Investigations revealed many animal welfare breaches of EU and Australian law, such as:

- Horses being handled cruelly including hitting, poking and kicking causing severe distress.
- Electric prods and wires used on horses.
- Horses falling down on slippery floors in the raceway.
- Captive bolt device regularly mis-firing without a backup device available.
- Horses struggling after failed stunning.
- Several horses not stunned correctly, hoisted while still showing signs of consciousness.
- Horses dragged into the stunning box with a winch.
- Some horses arriving sick, lame or emaciated.
- Horses being able to see the horses in front of them hoisted and throats slit.
- Horses heads restrained in kill box.

Anja Hazekamp, MEP, The Left, the Netherlands thanked Mr Celotto for his presentation and gave the floor to the following speaker.

The North American Horse Slaughter Pipeline - Areas of Concern

Sonja Meadows President & Founder, Animals' Angels Inc. (USA) started by saying that for most horses the slaughter pipeline starts at one of the 100+ horse auctions across the US and Canada, where horses are being sold to slaughter buyers. The cruelty often starts there as horses are commonly held in large pens holding 30-50 animals which triggers kicking, biting and fighting – animals often sustain severe injuries. Auction employees are often afraid of these agitated animals, which results in excessive use of whips or sticks. Food and water are also rarely available. After the sale, horses are transported in cattle trailers, holding as many as 40 animals, with no individual stalls and no access to water. Aggressive horses fight for space, horses slip and fall and are trampled to death by surrounding horses. The temperatures in these stalls can soar up to 60 degrees Celsius in the summertime and heat exhaustion is a real danger to these animals. Transport length differs greatly from EU transport, in North America horses can be transported for up to 28 hours without food, water or rest.

Once the horses arrive, at the slaughterhouse feedlots, things only get worse. The temperatures where the main feedlots are located can drop to -36 degrees Celsius with a wind chill factor of -55 Celsius. No shelter, no dry resting area, no protection from elements, not even pregnant mares or foals. Multiple investigations documented dead new born foals, frozen to the ground. Feedlots often hold thousands of horses, which creates problems. Lack of hoof care causes overgrown, cracked hooves. Chances to detect sickness, injuries or mares giving birth in a timely manner are slim. Adequate veterinary care or euthanasia of horses in distress is questionable. Observations included sick or injured horses, horses with open, infected wounds and horses with advanced Strangles infections. Dead horses are left inside the pen area with scavengers feeding on their carcasses among the other, alive horses. The EU Animal Protection Regulation only applies to horses at the slaughter plant and the adjacent lairage area, not horses inside the feedlot. Once the horses arrive at the plant, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency examines the animals and the required paperwork. Horses have to be accompanied by an Equine Identification Document (EID), completed by the previous owner or

horse trader, verifying that the horse has not received any substance banned for use in food-producing animals and has not been treated with certain veterinary products for the last 180 days. Information provided by the previous owner or transient agent often proves to be incorrect. In Ms Meadows' opinion, with the current system in place it is next to impossible to check the information provided. When the Commission carried out an official audit in Canada in 2018, it concluded that "the information contained in several of the EIDs appeared to be incomplete and unreliable, which affects the reliability of guarantees provided by the relevant authorities that horses slaughtered in Canada for exports to the EU have not been treated with illegal substance prior to slaughter or that the required withdrawal periods of veterinary products have been respected." The European Commission's thus confirms the lack of traceability. To conclude, ten years of investigations have provided ample evidence that there are grave animal welfare concerns in every step of the North American slaughter pipeline. No animal should ever have to endure what these horses go through every single day. She called on the European Commission to take action and immediately suspend all horse meat imports from Canada.

A member of the audience asked Mr Celotto giving the poor standards in Australia, is there any way to improve the conditions in transport and slaughter in Australia? What is the Australian government doing to solve this issue?

Elio Celotto Campaign Director, Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses (Australia) answered that Australia is a large country and it is burdensome to police these issues and there seems to be an utter lack of regard at the abattoir. It is going to take the EU to convince the Australian government to make changes in order to import horsemeat from the country.

Anja Hazekamp, MEP, The Left, the Netherlands gave the floor to the following speaker.

NGO Investigations and EU Audits in South America - Petition demanding an Import Suspension

Sabrina Gurtner Project Manager, Animal Welfare Foundation (Germany) stated that despite the promises of European importers to improve animal welfare with manual and audits, the situation remains unchanged. Nine years after their first investigation, the series of abuse and neglect of horses continues on the same level. In Argentina and Uruguay, horses are mostly traded through auctions and markets, sometimes the dealers buy them directly from farmers. They keep the horses at the assembly center until they have a full truck load, which can take days or weeks. The assembly centers do not currently have to comply with EU welfare standards, except those which belong to slaughterhouses. Animal welfare conditions are very poor – horses are exposed to extreme weather, there is not enough feed or water, no veterinary care, and horses often die without assistance. In 2018, an EU audit in Argentina highlighted animal welfare concerns at assembly centers. The report states " the occurrence of death of horses in acopios (assembly centers) over a substantial period of time without being recorded or detected implies that official services would not be aware of possible animal welfare or other issues, and not be in the position to intervene in a timely fashion". Currently, EU welfare standards also do not apply to the transport – the vehicles used to transport horses are open cattle trailers without roof, which are unsuitable, pose a high risk of injury. The horses are transported for long distances, over 1000 km, with no supply of water or feed. They are not transported in separate stalls. If horses fall down during the journey, they are often trampled to death. Horses that are unfit, are often transported regardless. EU approved slaughterhouses in third-countries have to comply with EU welfare standards, however it appears that this does not occur. Former employees of a slaughterhouse estimate that horses are dragged with chains and let to die in the unloading area. If they are still alive in the morning they are carried into the slaughterhouse – this is a serious breach of EU standards. Many other non-compliances with EU law were observed: violent handling by incompetent staff, no medical care for animals in need, muddy pens without clean water and dry resting areas, and risks of injuries caused by fences, slippery floors, etc. In addition to welfare violations, there are also concerns regarding traceability and food safety risks. In Argentina and Uruguay, the consumption of horsemeat is prohibited, and horses are slaughtered for exports only. Often, purchased from legal and illegal sources – including work horses, rodeo horses, racehorses, blood mares and stolen horses.

Since horses are not considered to be food producing animals, they are often given drugs. The traceability system in place is unreliable and relies only on the declarations of dealers, horses are marked with ear tags only shortly before being sent to slaughter, in addition the national traceability rules are not enforced. The identification system fails to guarantee traceability, opening the door to fraud. Since 2002 media have been reporting about stolen horses ending up at slaughterhouses in Argentina. A former policeman estimates that 50% of horses in slaughterhouses in Argentina are stolen. The audits of the European Commission and importers are announced in advance, and therefore provisional shelters are built, injured, sick and emaciated horses are removed and only animals with ear tags remain, if any. The latest EU audit report on Uruguay and Argentina confirms the observations of the speakers as in both audits it was evident that authorities manipulated the information presented to the inspectors. The most recent EU audits come to the following conclusions: "the official controls in the assembly centers do not ensure that EU and national welfare requirements are met" (Uruguay, 2018) and "full traceability of live horses destined for slaughter for the EU market is not ensured" (Argentina, 2018) and "the shortcomings identified do not allow the competent authorities to provide assurances that they meet all the relevant EU standards". She then presented a [petition on change.org](#) that was launched together with international animal welfare coalition to call on the Commission to suspend the import of non-EU horsemeat that has not been produced in line with EU standards.

A member of the audience asked Ms Meadows whether there are merits on the US recommencing inspections and US horse slaughter plants re-opening?

Sonja Meadows, President & Founder, Animals' Angels Inc. (USA) answered that proponents of horse slaughter often claim that things were better when slaughter plants were open in the US and the FDA carried out inspections, but this is not the case. Slaughter on American territory is as inhumane as anywhere else.

Anja Hazekamp, MEP, The Left, the Netherlands gave the floor to the following speaker.

Eurogroup for Animals' Report on EU Horsemeat Imports Calls on the EU Commission

Daniel Pérez Vega Programme Officer, Trade & Animal Welfare, Eurogroup for Animals wished to give a presentation focusing on how the EU can use trade as a tool to improve the welfare of horses in third countries. The EU is the biggest consumer of horsemeat – however consumption has been decreasing over the past decade, certainly the horsemeat scandal in 2014 contributed to that. Following the trend in consumption, imports have also decreased. The volume that used to be imported from Mexico has not entirely been replaced by other origins, showing it is useful to enact a ban on specific countries. Today, there are only four countries exporting horse meat to the EU and Argentina is by far the biggest supplier – the other origins are Uruguay, Canada and Australia. What is interesting is the state of play of trade agreements between these countries and the EU. Argentina and Uruguay, as part of the Mercosur, have negotiated a trade agreement with the EU that is not yet in force. Australia is negotiating a trade agreement and Canada has already CETA. There are two or three ways in which FTAs can have an impact on animal welfare. The first impact is tariff liberalization – when negotiating a FTAs tariffs on horsemeat are usually removed because the EU wants to liberalize as many products as possible. This sends a wrong message to third countries where minimum welfare standards are not met. A second impact is animal welfare cooperation – this can be a real opportunity to raise the issue – with Canada discussions are taking place on animal welfare within the regulatory cooperation forum. Another impact could be in the provisions of the SPS chapter: these can facilitate audits and improve traceability and food safety. Finally, another impact outside the remit of FTAs could be restrictions on trade based on animal welfare considerations. How can the EU use trade as a tool? He proceeded to give a number of recommendations.

- All imported equine meat must comply with EU animal welfare standards at slaughter.
- Suspension of imports from countries if EU audits demonstrate a lack of enforcement.
- Trade agreements should include conditional liberalization of horse meat imports.
- Allowing the possibility of unannounced audits.

- Working to improve equine welfare outside the EU through cooperation on animal welfare with relevant partner countries.
- Greater (mandatory) traceability of horse meat products by introducing Country of Origin Labelling.

A member of the audience asked about the CETA – what can be done in terms of ratification of the CETA and animal welfare? Are there measures the EU can undertake?

Daniel Pérez Vega Programme Officer, Trade & Animal Welfare, Eurogroup for Animals said that the first thing would be to bring this up to the regulatory forum, and then he noted that discussions are still ongoing in national parliaments and it would be sensible to bring the issue to national legislatures.

A member of the audience posited that some people argue that if the EU was to suspend imports of horsemeat, the trade would go somewhere else. What are the views on this?

Sabrina Gurtner, Project Manager, Animal Welfare Foundation (Germany) noted that south American countries already now export horsemeat to other continents, such as Asia or Russia – however the EU is the main customer of Argentina and Uruguay. If that trade was going to be suspended, the number of slaughter houses would reduce drastically, which is what occurred in Mexico.

A member of the audience asked if there was anything Canadian MPs could do in order to bring this issue to attention.

Daniel Pérez Vega, Programme Officer, Trade & Animal Welfare, Eurogroup for Animals stressed that it is important to put the issue on the agenda and MPs have a role to play in this sense.

A member of the audience asked how a ban on imports would work in terms of compliance with WTO law.

Daniel Pérez Vega Programme Officer, Trade & Animal Welfare, Eurogroup for Animals talked about Mexico and how production always increased until 2014, but once the EU ban was implemented production started declining. This shows that ban on imports do work. In terms of legal obstacles, with Mexico it was not a ban on imports per se, they did not renew the controls on residues – the audit came negative and showed the controls were not effective.

A member of the audience asked about the role of consumers.

Anja Hazekamp, MEP, The Left, the Netherlands said there are in the EU many consumers who do not want to eat horsemeat, but most horsemeat does not end up in supermarkets, but it is used in processed products. Consumers are often not aware of the presence of horsemeat in their meals. It is important to raise awareness on this issue, which is why reports from NGOs and investigations are very valuable. Petitions also play an important role.

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