
**David BYRNE European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection
Animal Welfare pushed up the International Agenda OIE Global Conference on
Animal Welfare Paris, 23 February 2004**

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Introduction

President, Ladies and Gentlemen

First, may I say that I am delighted to be here today to address such a distinguished audience at this important, and indeed, unprecedented event.

And may I also express, on behalf of the European Commission, our congratulations and wholehearted support for the OIE's excellent initiative towards the promotion of animal welfare both for the work it has done to date, and for its well designed plans to take matters forward into the future.

I am also pleased that the European Commission and a number of EU Member States have been able to contribute in a very practical way to the organisation of this conference.

Animal welfare standards are not defined at international level, except in Conventions by the Council of Europe. We, therefore, fully recognise that the OIE, as a global organisation with 166 member countries, is uniquely placed to facilitate international discussions.

Our trading partners are well aware that the EU wishes to pursue this with vigour. And we welcome that 166 members in the OIE have signed up to the resolution that animal welfare deserves to be considered as part of the development of international standards and guidelines.

Observer status for the Commission

This occasion will also see the official confirmation of the European Commission's newly acquired observer status within the OIE. This will allow the Commission to contribute much more actively to future discussions.

International agreements on animal welfare

Turning to the WTO, the EU is pleased that the Doha 2001 conclusions placed non-trade concerns, including animal welfare, firmly on the agenda for future agricultural negotiations. The "Green box" provides the facility for non-trade distorting payments to be made to producers on such issues, thus reflecting the growing demand for a more sustainable form of agriculture.

The decisions taken in Doha fully safeguard the rights of governments to take measures to protect their consumer interests. In June 2000 as part of our contribution to the debate on consumer concerns, the EU made a specific submission to the WTO Committee on Agriculture on "Animal welfare and agricultural trade".

The European Commission is committed to pursuing and achieving the vision of Doha in the animal welfare and all other dimensions through a process of constructive dialogue and cooperation with our trading partners.

However, I recognise that this process will have a better foundation in combination with the international standards currently being developed by the OIE.

The unanimous decision of the OIE member countries to mandate the OIE to address animal welfare explodes the myth that this is only an issue for richer, more developed countries.

We are delighted to participate in the debate on future international guidelines and standards and we hope of course that our experiences will prove to be useful in informing that debate.

The work already undertaken in this field by other organisations also needs to be borne in mind. For example, the Council of Europe, which has 45 member countries, has been at the forefront of promoting animal welfare within the framework of various Conventions and through specific recommendations.

I would like to endorse the importance the OIE has placed on the need to base welfare guidelines and principles on the best available science and I applaud the setting up of the various experts group to advise on specific issues sea and land transport, slaughter for human consumption and killing for disease control.

Future OIE guidelines and standards, with international acceptance, will provide a solid basis for discussions and negotiations between trading partners to assist member countries in bilateral and multilateral discussions and I very much look forward to this coming to fruition.

Stakeholder involvement

Ladies and Gentlemen, the significance of this conference should not be underestimated. It marks the very first opportunity for stakeholders, scientists and governments to debate animal welfare issues in a worldwide perspective.

And perhaps most significant of all is the active involvement of stakeholders from civil society as well as from industry.

Our experience within the European Union of canvassing the views of NGOs and individual citizens has been a driving factor underpinning our resolve to promote initiatives to improve animal welfare standards the way animals are raised, treated and transported within our borders.

However, it is paramount that those contributing to the animal welfare debate participate in a positive and constructive fashion, rather than merely trying to score 'cheap points' in needlessly criticising one another. Our collective achievements in ensuring animal protection can be best maximised by cooperating in a spirit of collaboration and with an active willingness to consider reasonable compromise.

Very little will be achieved by mere hyperbole, or disinformation. We all need to be reasonable and realistic in our approach to this issue if measurable progress is to be made.

In Europe citizens care deeply about animal welfare. It is a sensitive and emotive subject. It is certainly a hot topic on the political agenda as indicated by the sheer volume of correspondence received by myself and the Member States.

European developments

We in the European Union have been to the fore in promoting animal welfare both within Europe and worldwide. We justifiably feel some pride in the advances that we have made to date in ensuring improved animal protection standards.

Advances in European welfare standards in recent years have included improved measures for the protection of laying hens and pigs. The European Treaties recognise animals as sentient beings. The Community has also negotiated the upgrading of the European Convention for the protection of animals during international transport.

The necessity to raise the standards of protection for transported animals led the Commission to adopt in July 2003 a proposal for new European legislation.

This proposal was carefully elaborated taking into account available scientific data and independent scientific advice. Intensive discussions took place with NGO's, industry and other stakeholders and an assessment of the possible socio-economic impacts of the proposed measures was carried out.

I hope that over the next couple of months that the spirit of compromise to improve transport standards will be evident among the Member States, otherwise a golden opportunity will be lost.

Another high profile example of the importance given to animal welfare was in the context of reform of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy agreed in the summer of last year.

This reform introduces the concept of the de-coupling from production of direct payments to farmers and cross compliance in relation to animal welfare where the framework for payments can be linked to welfare standards. It also covers incentives to encourage producers to strive towards higher welfare standards.

I should mention here the main criticism often voiced by producers and certain sections of the food industry that higher welfare standards lead to higher production and supply costs.

The experience within Europe has shown that in many cases there are no significant additional costs in improving animal protection. Indeed, if such costs are experienced, they can be more than recovered by the price differential of superior more "animal welfare friendly" products, provided that these are effectively marketed and consumers properly informed.

It is of obvious importance that markets evolve and adapt in response to consumer demands. It is encouraging in this regard to see, for example, the shift towards the use of free range eggs by some of the international fast food chains. I would accept however that there is still a considerable way to go as regards consumers translating their opinions on welfare issues into positive food choices, and I recognise that this represents a challenge to the food industry.

Conclusion

I am personally delighted that the issue of animal welfare is now attracting such specific global focus.

Before concluding I wish to underline again the European Commission's commitment to working with the OIE and our trading partners in following up the outcome of this conference. In this way we can work together to secure real and demonstrable improvements in the welfare of animals worldwide. I wish you all a successful conference.