

Long distance animal transport: the way forward

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Summary

Too often, the issue of animal welfare during transport is the subject of emotional debates. For farmers within the International Federation of Agricultural Producers, it is important that the economic, scientific and practical aspects be taken into account when setting international rules for animal welfare. Farmers also stress the need to combine scientific data with their practical experience. Raising awareness, adopting a risk-based approach, education, labelling, slaughterhouse capacity and animal health, as well as standards and rules, are issues of importance for developing a long distance transportation infrastructure respectful of animal welfare around the world.

Keywords

Animals, International Federation of Agricultural Producers, Legislation, Transport, Welfare.

Trasporto di animali su lunga distanza: la via d'uscita

Riassunto

Troppo spesso la questione del benessere animale durante i trasporti a lunga distanza è argomento di movimentati dibattiti. Per gli allevatori della Federazione Internazionale dei Produttori Agricoli, è basilare che gli aspetti economici, scientifici e pratici vengano presi in considerazione quando si stabiliscono regolamenti internazionali per il benessere animale. Gli allevatori inoltre fanno pressioni perché si coniughino i dati scientifici con la loro esperienza pratica. La crescente consapevolezza, l'approccio basato sull'analisi del rischio, la formazione, l'etichettatura, la capienza dei mattatoi e la sanità animale, così come standard

e norme, sono importanti temi sulla base dei quali sviluppare, a livello mondiale, infrastrutture per il trasporto a lunga distanza nel rispetto del benessere animale.

Parole chiave

Animali, Benessere, Federazione Internazionale dei Produttori Agricoli, Legislazione, Trasporto.

Introduction

Transporting animals is part of livestock farming, which consists of sending animals to markets for breeding, rearing or fattening purposes or for slaughter and meat production. This is the basis of enhancing animal production and it is happening around the world. Almost all animal transport operations are performed by road. A small minority of animals are transported by sea, rail and air, or combinations of these. In many countries, animals are still moved on foot between farms and local markets.

Every day, many farm animals are moved and transported from over a few kilometres or for much longer distances. Farmers, traders and slaughterhouses benefit from this because of enhanced quality of the animals (and their products) and consumers benefit from the improved availability of high quality produce at lower prices.

Animal welfare during transport is the subject of debate, a debate which has often been based on an emotional approach. However, it is important that the economic, scientific and practical dimensions should also be taken into account by legislative and executive bodies and the animal welfare movement.

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The internationally-recognised needs of animals are summarised as follows:

- access to proper and sufficient feed and water
- access to adequate shelter
- the opportunity to display normal patterns of behaviour
- physical handling in a way that minimises the likelihood of unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress
- protection from, and rapid diagnosis of, any significant injury or disease.

It goes without saying that the welfare of farm animals during loading, transport and offloading should be guaranteed. The discussion then is how to measure animal welfare; often this is done by observation. The International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) stresses the need to combine the scientific data provided by researchers with the practical experience of professionals (farmers, livestock traders, market operators, transporters and slaughterhouses).

Removing animal transport does not always result in the trade in animals being replaced by trade in frozen meat. This was shown in the 1990s when, because of BSE, exports of live cattle from Ireland to Egypt and Libya was prohibited. These two countries turned to Australia for imports of live animals.

Principles

Proper transport of farm animals should be based on the following considerations:

- transporting only healthy animals
- good preparation of the animals to be transported
- high standards regarding assembly, loading, vehicle movement, stops and offloading
- limiting transport duration by avoiding unnecessary stops
- ensuring sufficient watering and feeding of animals for transport operations that exceeding a certain duration.

Current guidelines and legislation

In 2001, the World Organisation for Animal Health (Office International des Épizooties: OIE) (172 member countries, of which many are developing countries) identified animal welfare as a high priority. It created a permanent animal welfare working group in 2002. After organising a major global conference on animal welfare in February 2004, the OIE adopted guidelines in 2004 and more specific welfare standards on land transport, sea transport, killing for disease control and slaughter for human consumption in 2005 (13). The OIE animal welfare guidelines currently in preparation concern the welfare of fish, the control of stray animals (e.g. for the control of rabies), laboratory animal welfare, zoo and exotic animal welfare and the housing of farmed animals.

IFAP stresses the need for guidelines to be 'outcome-based' rather than 'prescriptive'. In other words, animal welfare regulations should ensure that specific welfare objectives are achieved, without prescribing any single way of doing it. A good example of this is the guideline for ritual slaughter (also: slaughter without prior stunning). The OIE does not prohibit slaughter without stunning, but does describe the most humane way of doing this.

In Europe, the Council of Europe (49 European countries) adopted a convention for the protection of animals, including technical protocols and codes of conduct for international transport, in 2004 (6, 7). The Committee of Council of Europe Ministers has adopted recommendations on the transport of horses, pigs, cattle, sheep, goats and poultry (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11).

The European Union (EU) is very active in the field of the animal rights protection. Its 2006-2010 Action Plan on the Protection and Welfare of Animals maps out the range of EU activities, which has a 'welfare quality' project (12). This project will end in 2009 with recommendations on how to measure animal welfare and how to link these to some sort of welfare labelling.

The EU's latest piece of legislation for animal transport (8) was implemented in the 27 EU Member States on 5 January 2007.

Other nations, such as New Zealand and Australia, have also adopted animal welfare schemes (Fig. 1). These schemes show that standards developed by OIE, EU and Council of Europe often set examples for other countries. Some countries, such as Germany, mention the protection of animal welfare in their constitution.

The way forward

Acceptance that transport is part of trade

There needs to be acceptance on all sides that without transport, there is no trade and therefore no market. However, IFAP accepts the fact that during transport animals are subjected to stress. It is therefore necessary to protect the well-being of animals during transport (feeding, watering, bedding, ventilation and space, and by limiting the total duration of transport) and to minimise the number of stressful situations (often during

loading, pausing and unloading). Authorities should not only enforce animal welfare standards, but also the means to monitor the situation on the ground. Animal welfare standards should be harmonised internationally.

Improvement of knowledge

Animal welfare is not an infallible science. The scientific approach to animal welfare implies measuring a few physiological parameters (cardiac rhythm, blood parameters) and observing the behaviour of animals. This is therefore difficult and complex. The duration and distance of transport, though the most obvious, are only two of the factors that need to be taken into account when approaching issues related to animal welfare during transport. However, loading, unloading and transit during (compulsory) stops at staging points are the most stressful operations for animals. Watering and feeding are most crucial for animal welfare and in many cases this can be done in the vehicle. It is therefore necessary that scientists and political/administrative decision-makers monitor the relevance of the standards and legislation in place and adapt

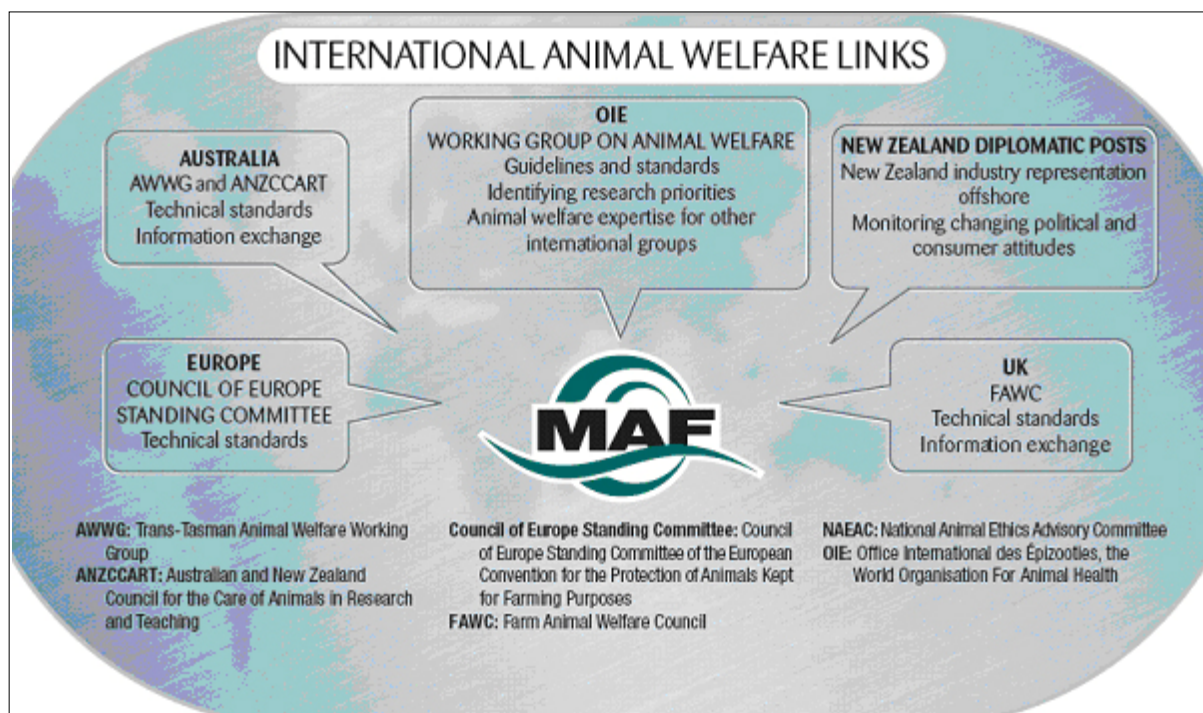


Figure 1
New Zealand animal welfare is based on standards set by other countries and organisations
Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), Wellington, New Zealand

these where and when needed. Professional daily practices and empirical knowledge should be taken into account.

Education

Part of the solution lies in raising the awareness of farmers and traders. Those who work with animals every day might develop certain habits. For example, research shows that cattle owners might not always be aware of lameness being a problem in their herd. Authorities can help by organising training courses for farmers, traders, drivers and slaughterhouse operators that would raise awareness and knowledge. Training the people who are responsible for handling animals can improve the conditions in which those operations are performed to the benefit of animal welfare.

Labelling

In the opinion of IFAP, welfare labelling should not become an obstacle to trade. The key is to help the consumer to choose products where farmers have made particular efforts to ensure the highest welfare standards. This means farmers and retailers need to find tools to communicate animal welfare to the consumer, so that the added costs that accompany higher standards can be earned back in the market. The industry must avoid overloading the consumer with additional labelling schemes.

Sufficient slaughterhouse capacity

The export of live cattle and sheep for slaughter is often put forward as an argument to criticise live animal transport and to request prohibitive measures, on the grounds that those trade operations can be alternatively performed with meat instead of live animals. Nevertheless, consumers in many countries request and require for fresh meat. To them, imports of frozen meat are not an alternative. Sometimes the consumer wants to be sure that the animal has been slaughtered according to religious rules. Some countries have however

banned ritual slaughter for animal welfare reasons.

Furthermore, the number of slaughterhouses has been reduced because of regulatory demands (hygiene rules etc.). Their concentration and increase scale leads to the constant extension of supply zones.

Farmers would be helped if slaughterhouses in their region could be maintained against the ever increasing pressures of multinational industries and large supermarkets.

Protecting animal health

In a time of ever-increasing globalisation and mobility of humans and animals, infectious diseases like avian influenza, Rift Valley fever, African swine fever and foot and mouth disease can be spread rapidly around the world. It is therefore of paramount importance that only healthy animals (with health certificates) are loaded and that the means of transport (and the animal handlers) are washed and disinfected after unloading. Global positioning systems (GPS) on lorries enable authorities to trace animal movements in case of calamities.

Conclusion

Scientists and livestock operators must try to share their knowledge and experience and find a common ground to formulate practical standards and legislation for long distance animal transport. As long as there is justification in terms of demand and markets, it should be possible to transport animals over long distances, provided their well-being is guaranteed. Farmers, traders, transporters, market operators, slaughterhouses, animal welfare organisations, retailers and consumer organisations must find ways of ensuring that this well-being is guaranteed and operators will have to be transparent to prove they are performing their tasks in accordance with the rules/recommendations.

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