Evaluation and assessment of the animal welfare action plan 2006-2010

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The Council took note of the presentation by the Commission of its **report on options for animal welfare labelling** and the establishment of a **European Network of Reference Centres** for the protection and welfare of animals.

The report identifies various issues concerning animal welfare labelling and communication, and the possible establishment of a European Network of Reference Centres for the protection and welfare of animals, based on the results of an external study provided to the Commission in January 2009.

The most feasible option for EU action empowering consumers to make informed purchasing decisions appears to be a Community Animal Welfare Label modelled after the EU organic label. This option is to a large extent in line with the guiding principles and also more compatible with limitations concerning the currently available scientific knowledge on animal welfare and related indicators. On the other hand, mandatory labelling of welfare standards is the option that provides most information to consumers, and leads to the highest pressure on producers to improve animal welfare. However, there are limited additional costs for processors and farmers possible under this option, as well as negative impacts on existing schemes.

The debate on how to improve the communication to consumers regarding animal welfare in livestock production has been running in the EU for several years.

The results of the feasibility study show that animal welfare labelling may raise consumer awareness and accelerate market penetration of animal welfare-friendly products that go beyond the minimum standards foreseen in EU legislation. The overall goal of policy in this area is to make it easier for consumers to identify and choose welfare-friendly products and thereby give an economic incentive to producers to improve the welfare of animals.

Surveys show that a majority of European consumers said that they lack information on the level of animal welfare provided in the production of the goods they buy. This is why the Community Action Plan on the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2006-2010 suggests the development of standardised animal welfare indicators, in order to provide for a science-based tool to make animal welfare measurable, more enforceable and easier to communicate to people.

In recent years, certification schemes have been widely introduced into the European agri-food sector. An animal welfare labelling scheme is a certification system that certifies an animal welfare standard above existing legal standards.

There are mainly three drivers of animal welfare relevant labelling schemes:

1) as a reaction to the BSE crisis and several other food incidents, food law has been undergoing major changes in the EU in recent years. The general trend of the growing body of food-related EU legislation is very much driven by the EU’s objective to see a quality-driven single market in foodstuffs;

2) public as well as private certification has become a widely accepted instrument for regulating food markets;

3) consumer demands support animal welfare labelling. Although consumer demands are still extremely diverse, especially with regard to products of animal origin, and major consumer segments have become increasingly price sensitive, empirical studies (mainly cluster analyses) have revealed the existence of a group of consumers who are interested in high-quality products. For these consumers, high quality often includes higher animal welfare standards.

A number of private schemes have emerged in recent years. Among these can be mentioned:

- schemes that focus only on animal welfare (e.g. Freedom Food (UK), Neuland (DE), Animal Index System (AT));

- schemes that focus on various aspects including animal welfare (e.g. organic farming, Label Rouge (FR));

- schemes that focus on aspects other than animal welfare but have positive side effects on animal welfare (e.g. PDO/PGI schemes).