Minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits

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The Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development adopted the own-initiative report by Stefan ECK (GUE/NGL, DE) on minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits.

Members recalled that the majority of rabbits are farmed for meat production, with over **340 million rabbits slaughtered for meat ever year**.

There are grave concerns regarding the poor welfare, high stress levels and high mortality and morbidity rates of farm rabbits in Europe.

The report suggested **phasing out battery and barren wire cages in rabbit farming**, and make the conversion to alternative methods of rabbit farming such as park farming or hutch systems, with grass as the main feed, which improve the comfort and welfare of farmed rabbits.

Member States and the Commission are called upon to undertake **further research** for the purpose of finding the best possible housing systems to improve animal welfare in different types of farming and to **preserve the quality and safety of rabbit meat imports** by undertaking thorough controls and inspections when these imports enter the Union.

Rabbit rearing: Members expressed concern that rabbits reared and fattened for meat production in the EU are kept in old-fashioned cages which do not conform to modern farming requirements. Rabbits are extremely sensitive animals and can suffer from a wide range of welfare problems and diseases caused by inappropriate breeding conditions. Few therapeutic tools are available to rabbit farmers and veterinarians to tackle the health problems that arise.

The report pointed out that rabbits weaned for fattening and does kept in alternative collective park systems, which typically provide 750 cm²/rabbit for growers and 800 cm²/rabbit for does, benefit from more space for movement. However, such systems will cause farms to incur costs, which needs to be taken into account by providing financial assistance to farmers who opt for this system for raising rabbits.

Transport and slaughtering: given that transport is a stressful experience for rabbits, Members stressed that rabbits should be fed and watered before long-distance transport and be provided with adequate food, water and space in transit, and that **transport times should be as limited as possible**. Moreover, rabbits should be fully stunned before slaughter.

Antimicrobial resistance: due to species-specific diseases and the high mortality rate inherent to rabbit farming, widespread routine administration of antibiotics has become a necessity, which can lead to an increase in antimicrobial resistance.

Members stressed that **antibiotics must be used only for treatment purposes** and should be followed by the appropriate withdrawal period before slaughter. Member States should be encouraged to gradually phase out the use of conventional battery cages across the EU.

In conclusion, the report encouraged the Commission, in the light of the high number of rabbits being farmed and slaughtered in the EU and the severe animal welfare implications of the systems currently used for keeping rabbits, to draw up a **roadmap** towards financially sustainable minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits. This roadmap should consist, as a minimum, of:

- the drafting of guidelines containing good practices and establishing animal welfare rules for rabbits;
- a Commission recommendation, taking into consideration existing national measures, containing, where appropriate, proposals for a common EU approach, in particular with regard to rabbit health, welfare and housing.

Lastly, the report encouraged Member States and the Commission to give **dedicated budgetary support** in order to undertake scientific research into health of farm rabbits, taking into account the request for a move towards other systems of production.