Minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits

2016/2077(INI) - 14/03/2017 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 410 votes to 205, with 59 abstentions, a resolution on minimum standards for the protection of farm rabbits.

An alternative motion for a resolution, tabled by the EPP group, was rejected in plenary by 235 votes to 388, with 62 abstentions.

Parliament 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 resolution 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;
- undertaking **further research** for the purpose of finding the best possible housing systems to improve animal welfare;
- **preserving the quality and safety of rabbit meat imports** by undertaking thorough controls and inspections when these imports enter the Union.

Rabbit rearing: given that rabbits are extremely sensitive animals and can suffer from a wide range of welfare problems and diseases caused by inappropriate breeding conditions, it is necessary to increase efforts tackle the lack of research and investment in medicines.

Members 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.

The resolution stated that any compulsory measure initiated will have to be backed up by the **budget necessary to support rabbit breeders**. A specific heading should be included for the purpose of promoting the consumption of rabbit meat.

Moreover, the Commission is invited to use **scientific evidence and findings** as the basis when proposing measures for housing requirements for breeding does and for rabbits reared for meat production.

Transport and slaughtering: Parliament 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.

Parliament stressed that **antibiotics must be used only for treatment purposes** and should be followed by the appropriate withdrawal period before slaughter. It emphasised that reducing the use of antibiotics, can only be achieved if stronger emphasis is placed on the management and monitoring of rabbit farms.

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, Parliament suggested drawing 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 resolution 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.