Report to the Animal Welfare Working Group of the OIE

Ethical concerns relevant to the work of the OIE on international animal welfare guidelines/standards

Long-distance transport (including export) of animals for slaughter

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The author acknowledges the help received from Dr. Michael Appleby (WSPA) in the preparation of this report.

Introduction

Around 60 billion animals are reared for food each year worldwide. Most are transported for slaughter, often long distances, both within and between countries. Animal welfare problems caused by transport include injury, disease, hunger, thirst, discomfort, pain, frustration, fear and distress. Resulting deaths, injuries and disease lead to downgrading of carcases and significant ethical and economic problems for the animal industries. Long distance transport takes place against a background of:

- Increasing concern for animal welfare in many countries
- Increasing understanding of animal welfare and the effects of transport
- Increasing awareness that animal welfare problems may be correlated with other problems, for example, in food safety and quality

The OIE states that “The use of animals carries with it an ethical responsibility to ensure the welfare of such animals to the greatest extent practicable” (Terrestrial Animal Health Code, Article 7.1.2 clause 6).

Furthermore, Chapter 3.1 of the Code is titled “Veterinary Services” and the first paragraph states: “The quality of the Veterinary Services depends on a set of factors, which include fundamental principles of an ethical, organisational and technical nature. The Veterinary Services shall conform to these fundamental principles, regardless of the political, economic or social situation of their country.”

Under the most widely used ethical approach, that of cost-benefit analysis, major disease risks and welfare problems would only be ethically justified if there were considerable benefits available from the long-distance transport of animals for slaughter.

Defining what is meant by long-distance transport for slaughter is difficult and using either journey time or distance is not possible because of their variability, except within some regions of the world such as the European Union. One pragmatic approach is to define “unnecessarily long transport” as a journey that goes past the nearest abattoir capable of slaughtering the animals.

Using this definition it is clear that a great deal of unnecessarily long transport takes place, specifically when animals are transported to distant slaughter locations when many closer ones exist.
Health and welfare of transported animals

Transporting animals causes stress and increases both their susceptibility to infection and their infectiousness. Furthermore it augments the contacts between animals and hence the spread of diseases. One of the main strategies to mitigate disease spread must be to minimize the numbers of live animals transported and the distances over which they are moved. The FAO (2002) describes live animal transport as “ideally suited for spreading disease,” given that animals may originate from different herds or flocks and are “confined together for long periods in a poorly ventilated stressful environment.”

Physical welfare problems caused by transport include injury, disease and stress. In the worst cases animals die, and mortality is increased by long journey times. One problematic example is the transport of “spent” laying hens for slaughter. Although there are many poultry slaughterhouses only a few will accept spent hens. This means that journey times for many of these animals are in excess of 24 hours. Solving such a problem is not easy as few poultry slaughter facilities are geared up (technically or through commercial arrangements) to deal with spent hens.

International opinions from countries, organisations and individuals

- OIE: “The amount of time animals spend on a journey should be kept to the minimum” (Terrestrial Animal Health Code, Articles 7.2.1 and 7.3.1)
- President of the OIE International Committee: “Why do we allow animals to be transported by truck or rail thousands of kilometres for slaughter, if they are going to pass many abattoirs that are able to handle them, to be delivered to a slaughter house remote from where the animals originated, and especially when animals from the area they end up in are often transported to a remote slaughterhouse as well? While such an approach may work well from an economic perspective it is definitely not good from an animal welfare, food quality and even from a food safety perspective” (O’Neil, Opening Address, Cairo)
- New Zealand: The export for slaughter of cattle, sheep, deer and goats is prohibited under a 2007 Customs Export Prohibition Order (although the prohibition is not absolute and individual consignments may be approved by MAF. Consultation is taking place on the conditions under which approval might be given)
- SCAHAW (2002): “Animals should not be transported if this can be avoided and journeys should be as short as possible”
- Federation of Veterinarians of Europe: The FVE (2001) has called for the replacement of the long distance transportation of live animals for slaughter as much as possible by a “carcass-only trade”
- European Food Safety Authority (2004): “Transport should therefore be avoided wherever possible and journeys should be as short as possible”
- Coalition of NGOs: “Long distance transport for slaughter is unnecessary and should be replaced by trade in carcasses and meat” (Appleby et al 2008)

Analysis of some claimed benefits put forward to justify the long distance transport of slaughter animals

Preference for freshly-killed meat
It is sometimes suggested that certain purchasers prefer meat that has been freshly killed rather than stored, chilled or frozen – although to our knowledge this is more often asserted by those selling the meat than demonstrated in the purchasers. However, there have been many cases in the past where people came to accept and even prefer chilled or frozen meat once they were familiar with it. This could be achieved in the markets concerned here, by a programme of education backed by increasing provision of refrigeration.

Requirement for particular slaughter or butchering methods

Purchasers may require animals to be slaughtered by certain methods, principally halal (Moslem Slaughter). However, this could readily be achieved near where the animals are raised rather than near the point of sale. For example, sheep currently exported live from Australia and other countries to the Middle East could be slaughtered by halal methods in the country of origin with personnel from the receiving country either inspecting the process or actually carrying it out and the additional possibility of verification by video.

There are cattle and horses being transported long distances to Italy, reputedly because customers prefer meat jointed by traditional Italian methods. Clearly such butchering could either be done in the country of origin or in Italy after transport of carcasses.

Requirement for religious festival

“A significant proportion of the trade in sheep for slaughter into the Middle East takes place to address the religious requirement that a live sheep be slaughtered and distributed as a charitable gift as part of the Hajj pilgrimage to the Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia … Today many pilgrims buy a sacrifice voucher in Mecca before the greater Hajj begins. This allows an animal to be slaughtered in their name without the pilgrim being physically present … It would seem entirely logical … to enable such a voucher system to be extended to enable the sheep to be slaughtered in Australia with the meat then distributed to those in need in poorer Islamic countries. Clearly there would need to be safeguards and inspections acceptable to all parties … put in place” (Agra CEAS Consulting, 2008).

Financial benefits and existing commercial practices

Individuals and companies involved in producing, transporting and slaughtering livestock may derive financial benefit from continuing their current arrangements. However, in many cases those same individuals and companies could gain from altered arrangements. As a general rule, rationalizing an industry so as to reduce unnecessary transport costs and disease risks should be to the benefit of the industry as a whole. In specific cases some commercial entities would lose but others would gain: for example, exporting carcases instead of cattle from Brazil would reduce work for animal handlers but increase that for slaughterers. Given the existence of local economic interests, national or international action is needed and may well be beneficial. For example, one study points out that by exporting live animals, countries are losing potential advantages in terms of employment and value added in the meat sector (Agra CEAS Consulting, 2008).

Without doubt there are workable ways to meet many or all of the various claimed benefits without imposing the high animal welfare costs of existing practices. Hence, to continue to transport animals unnecessarily long distances for slaughter is ethically unjustified in many or all cases.

Proposal

OIE should recommend phasing out of unnecessarily long transport (including export) of animals for slaughter. It should set a target date, for example 2020, and work with stakeholders including governments towards ending such transport by that date.
This will require developments in infrastructure such as local slaughterhouses, veterinary services and refrigerated transport and storage. Producers, processors, retailers and consumers need to be educated in welfare issues and markets for refrigerated meats need to be developed.

References


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European Food Safety Authority 2004 Opinion of the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare on a request from the Commission related to the welfare of animals during transport. The EFSA Journal, issue The welfare of animals during transport

FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) 2002 FAO Animal Production and Health Paper 153: Improved animal health for poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods, Rome
