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Fact sheet: Long-distance transports of unweaned calves

Over the past five years, the Animal Welfare Foundation has been working intensively on the long-distance transports of unweaned calves and lambs. Animal welfare related issues during transport of these very young animals are:

- transport during a critical life phase of these calves (the so-called immunological gap)
- transport via several assembly centers
- lack of food provision for many hours or days

Definitions

The term "unweaned" calves and lambs includes young animals that are still dependent on their mother's milk or milk substitutes. Their metabolism is not, or not yet completely, ready for hay and water. According to a recommendation of the European Commission (letter, 04/12/2009 SANCO D5 DS/dj D(2009)), lambs can not be considered as weaned before the age of 6 weeks and calves before the age of 8 weeks.

Background

In the European Union 22.9 million cows produce milk. With 4.1 million dairy cows, Germany is the largest milk producer in the EU. This necessarily entails a large number of calves. The high level of breeding specialisation for milk yield has resulted in a surplus of pure-bred male calves from dairy cows, as well as a surplus of female calves not intended for use as dairy cows. There is only demand for these calves in countries where they are fattened for veal production or for export as cattle for slaughter. Within the EU, around 1.5 million unweaned calves are transported annually. The main importing countries are the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, France and Italy.

Requirements of the EU Regulation

According to the European Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005, calves may be transported for up to eight hours from the age of 10 days and for more than eight hours from 14 days.

This is despite the fact that the calf's immune defense is weakest between the second and sixth week of life (immunological gap) and experts warn against any stressors during this period.

Article 3 of the Regulation stipulates the general conditions for the transport of animals. It states that no person shall transport animals or cause animals to be transported in a way likely to cause them injury or undue suffering.

The relevant conditions in Article 3 include:

[...] the following conditions shall be complied with:

- a) [...] to minimise the length of the journey and meet animals' needs during the journey;**
- c) the means of transport are designed, constructed, maintained and operated so as to avoid injury and suffering and ensure the safety of the animals,**
- h) water, feed and rest are offered to the animals at suitable intervals and are appropriate in quality and quantity to their species and size.**

According to Annex I of Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005, Chapter V, section 1.2., the maximum transport time for cattle, sheep, pigs and horses may not exceed eight hours. In accordance with Chapter V, paragraph 1, point 1.3., the maximum transport time can only be extended under certain conditions, for example, by providing feed and water in the vehicle (Chapter VI, point 1.3. and 2.2.)

Provided that the calves are fed, the transport time may be extended in accordance with Chapter V, paragraph 1, point 1.4. and unweaned calves may be transported for a period of nine hours, after which they must be given a rest and care break of at least one hour "to be given liquid and if necessary fed". Only then can the transport continue for a further 9 hours, making a total of 19 hours.

According to Chapter VI, point 1.3., the means of transport shall carry a sufficient quantity of appropriate feed to fulfill the needs of the animals during the transport. According to point 2.2, the vehicle must be equipped to ensure the watering of the animals; the drinking devices must be functional and constructed and positioned in such a way that they are accessible to all categories of animals to be watered on board the vehicle.

Needs-based care for calves

For the purposes of the Regulation, the feeding of unweaned calves can only refer to the supply with milk or milk substitutes, as this is the only way to meet their needs (in accordance with Article 3), i.e. there can be no distinction between drinking and feeding.

In practice, in a truck loaded on three-decks it is not possible to supply all suckling calves with milk replacer.

During our operations, we have never observed calves in lorries being fed according to their needs. The drinking devices are not suitable, are not recognised by the calves as drinking devices and only offer water. The lack of care for the young animals during a lengthy transport duration leads to stress due to hunger and thirst, which is recognisable by clearly perceptible, continuous vocalisations, mutual sucking and biting of the metal bars of the truck.

In a letter¹, German Federal Minister Klöckner explained the problem of the needs-based care of unweaned calves. According to the missive, the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture is currently not aware of any animal transport vehicles which fulfill the special requirements for the transport of unweaned calves. If no approved vehicles are available, Chapter V, point 1.2 of Annex I to the Regulations stipulates that all transport of unweaned calves must be completed within 8 hours. A new transport of a maximum of 8 hours would only be possible after a 48-hour resting period.

As early as 2008, in response to a request for information from the EU Commission on the care of unweaned calves during long-distance transports, the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture referred to the "Handbuch Tiertransporte" (Animal Transport Manual) and to a statement by the BSI (Training and Consultancy Institute for animal welfare at transport and slaughter). In their statement, the BSI reaches the following conclusions on the transport of unweaned animals:²

- Unweaned calves and unweaned lambs cannot be adequately fed in a vehicle.
- Providing electrolyte solution is not a needs-based supply and does not lead to satiation of the unweaned calves/unweaned lambs.
- Suckling calves can only be described as weaned from the age of two months at the earliest, i.e. when they are capable of independently absorbing water and solid feed. They should only be taken on long-distance transports from this age (best practice: no longer than 8 hours, compromise: no longer than 12 hours).

¹ German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture letter to Minister Glauber, 6th August 2019

² Az.SANCO D5 LPA/nl D(2008)450043

The Handbuch Tiertransporte³ supports this view: "Currently available supply systems do not allow for a species-specific and behaviourally appropriate supply of unweaned calves with feed (milk/replacer). Even pressurised liquid feed systems do not meet these requirements – independent of whether the drinker is covered with a rubber teat. This also applies to liquid feeding systems that consist of rubber teats and are equipped with a movable metal pin inside, which the calves can move into their desired position. Such systems are not considered acceptable for the supply of liquid to unweaned calves on long-distance transports. In this respect, any current means of transport cannot be authorised for long transportation of unweaned calves".

In response to complaints, the EU Commission refers to the EU Commission's animal welfare platform, the working group on "Transport of Unweaned Calves". On the 07/10/2019 it came to the conclusion that in order to meet their physiological needs, calves must maintain 10 – 20% of their body weight per day in the form of protein. The maximum permitted interval between feeds is 12 hours. It can therefore be assumed that calves suffer from hunger during long-distance transports. So far, the EU Commission has not published the results of this working group, and thus it can be concluded that long-distance transports of unweaned calves violate Article 3 of the Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005.

Conclusions

The special requirements of Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 for long-distance transport of unweaned calves are not practicable and therefore systematically violated. Therefore:

- Transport vehicles should not be authorised (Article 18) for the long transport of unweaned calves
- the maximum transport time of eight hours laid down in Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 must not be extended.

³ Animal Transport Manual, May 2019