

Position paper: Poor welfare during road transportation of lambs

Background information

In total, each year more than three million sheep are transported by road and sea. The main exporting countries are Romania, Poland, Hungary and Spain, while Italy and Greece are the biggest importers in the European Union, and the Middle East, Turkey and Israel - the biggest non-EU importers. The majority of transported sheep are lambs under one year of age, with peaks in transport numbers before Christian or Muslim festivals.

The transport of lambs is legislated by Council Regulation (EC) No. 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. Beside general requirements, the Regulation provides specific provisions for the transport of lambs, such as space requirements and journey time limits for unweaned and weaned lambs. Unweaned lambs are very young animals still depending on milk diet to survive, whereas weaned lambs are over six weeks of age and able to digest water and roughage.

As young as only one week old, the unweaned lambs can be legally transported over long distances on journeys of up to 19 hours. The Regulation requires a mid-journey rest stop after nine hours, where the animals should be supplied according to their needs with milk or milk replacer.

From the age of six weeks and more, lambs are considered weaned and can be transported for maximum 29 hours, with a mid-journey rest stop for their supply after 14 hours of transport.

These minimum requirements are frequently ignored by the industry and not enforced by Member State officials, resulting in undue suffering of lambs during long distance transport.

Main infringements and welfare implications

The analysis of data gathered during our investigations between 2016 and 2019 shows that the following problems observed in transports of lambs are the main factors impairing the welfare of lambs on board of road vehicles:

- Mid-journey supply with water and feed (milk replacer) is ignored
- Drinking devices inadequate for lambs, restricted access to drinkers
- Inadequate bedding
- Insufficient space for lambs, animals not being able to lie down or stand in a natural position
- Ignoring journey time limits for unweaned lambs by mixing them with weaned lambs
- Transport of unweaned lambs without the required special arrangements (road transport vehicles not equipped with drinking system suitable for this category of transported animals)
- Exceeded maximum journey times
- Cold or heat stress
- Inadequate vehicle design resulting in lambs getting their heads or legs trapped in metal elements of the vehicle
- Transport of unfit/downer lambs
- Defective documentation and unrealistic route planning

Conclusions and requests

Until today the conditions of lambs transported for slaughter remain poor and improvements of their welfare are urgently needed.

The basic principle of Regulation (EC) No 1/2005, its Article 3, says that:

“No person shall transport animals or cause animals to be transported in a way likely to cause injury or undue suffering to them. (Article 3)”.

Animals transported without adequate liquid and feed, without possibility to rest (due to overcrowding or a lack of bedding) and/or to stand in a natural and comfortable position, transported in totally inadequate vehicles (e.g. due to large gaps between the floor and the side wall) cannot be considered transported in line with the Article quoted above.

Especially unweaned lambs show all the signs of stress and suffering during long distance transport and this is primarily caused by the fact that they suffer hunger. There is no technical possibility to feed these animals on board of vehicles and thus they should be considered unfit for journeys exceeding 8 hours.

The fact that neither police fines, nor official complaints to the responsible Member States and the EU Commission have led to any significant improvements shows that there is a general problem of enforcement of the Regulation (EC) No 1/2005.

Since all these welfare problems are aggravated during transport, we are calling on an eight-hour journey limit for lambs.