Key facts...

- The RSPCA believes that all animals should be effectively stunned before they are slaughtered.
- Scientific research indicates that the slaughter of an animal without pre-stunning can cause unnecessary suffering.
- Whilst slaughter without pre-stunning remains permissible under the law, we would like to see mandatory method of slaughter labelling introduced to allow consumers to decide whether they wish to buy meat from non-stunned animals, as well as improvements made to protect those animals involved during slaughter.
- Around 40 million cattle, sheep, pigs and calves and around 900 million poultry are killed each year in the UK.
- It is estimated that 3% of cattle, 10% of sheep and goats and 4% of poultry that are slaughtered in Britain are not pre-stunned, with one estimate showing 114 million animals are killed annually in the UK using the Halal method and a further 2.1 million under Shechita.

Introduction

Around 40 million cattle, sheep, pigs and calves and around 900 million poultry are killed each year in the UK. Rules on slaughter are set by the Welfare at the Time of Killing Regulations 2015 (WATOK) which transpose the relevant piece of EU law into the UK statute book. Under WATOK, all animals must be stunned (rendered insensible to pain) before they are slaughtered. However, there is an exemption in these rules which allows slaughter without pre-stunning for religious communities. As a result, recent estimates suggest that 3% of cattle, 10% of sheep and goats and 4% of poultry slaughtered in Britain are not pre-stunned.

There is widespread continuing concern about the existing exemption within WATOK. The RSPCA and others (including the Farm Animal Welfare Committee and the British Veterinary Association) believe that on the basis of the available evidence indicating the suffering caused by the slaughter of conscious animals, the exemption should be removed and all animals stunned before slaughter.

Welfare concerns

Scientific research indicates that the slaughter of an animal without pre-stunning can cause unnecessary suffering. Whilst the RSPCA believes that religious beliefs should be respected we continue to press for changes to legislation that would improve the welfare of all animals being slaughtered.

The 2003, the Farm Animal Welfare Council Report on animal welfare at slaughter, included a review of slaughter without pre-stunning. After reviewing available evidence and information, it concluded the following:

- on handling before slaughter, the level of restraint needed to expose the throat and perform an effective cut was far greater than that needed for conventional slaughter,
- if a neck cut is performed, it would trigger a barrage of sensory information to the brain in a

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2 FSA 2012 Results of 2011 animal welfare survey in GB. FSA. Figures extrapolated from data collected at GB abattoirs during one week in September.
3 FAWC 2003. Welfare of farmed animals at slaughter and killing – part 1 red meat animals.
4 ibid

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conscious animal. FAWC concluded: “We are persuaded that such a massive injury would result in very significant pain and distress in the period before insensibility supervenes”

- the time taken to lose brain responsiveness after the cut varied according to the species but in sheep it was 5-7 seconds after the cut, in adult cattle 22-40 seconds and in calves 10-120 seconds.

Overall, FAWC considered that: “slaughter without pre-stunning is unacceptable and that the Government should repeal the current exemption”. They also recommended that until the Government repeals the current exemption, any animal that is not stunned before slaughter should receive an immediate post cut stun.

**Amending WATOK to improve animal welfare**

Brexit presents the UK with greater freedom to set its own rules around animal slaughter and, although nothing in EU law has ever legally prohibited a member state from banning slaughter without pre-stunning or requiring a post-cut stun, the RSPCA would like to see the Government take this opportunity to bring about an end to slaughter without pre-stunning.

However, whilst slaughter without pre-stunning remains it must be ensured that the provisions are used in cases where the religious exemption applies only and we would also like to see WATOK amended to make sure that it better protects animal welfare at the time of slaughter. These amendments should include post-cut stunning for ruminants, minimum stun parameters for poultry, effective labelling and improvements around some of the technical details contained within the Regulations (for example on electrical waterbath stunners).

**Labelling**

The RSPCA believes that consumers have a right to know where their meat comes from, how it was reared, and how it was killed at the time of slaughter. We would like to see meat sold in supermarkets, shops and other food outlets clearly labelled where non-stun slaughter methods have been used.

An EU-wide survey reported that 72% of consumers wanted to know the method of slaughter for the meat products they eat. Currently, this is not the case. It is understood that non-stunned kosher slaughtered meat enters the secular market, and it is also not clear whether meat labelled Halal has come from animals that have been stunned (it should be noted that the majority of meat that comes from Halal slaughter is stunned). ‘Stunned’ or ‘Non-stunned’ are appropriate, non-contentious, factual labels for meat that provide sufficient information for the consumer to make an informed choice.

Further, it is currently a legal requirement, under WATOK, that the number of animals slaughtered according to religious rites is sufficient to meet only the demand of the respective religious communities. This requirement needs better enforcement as meat enters the non-religious market due to oversupply and inability to use certain parts of the animal in the religious market. Clearer labelling, as proposed, will help with this.

For more information about the opportunities for improving farm animal welfare that Brexit may offer the UK, please see our detailed briefings available on our website: [http://politicalanimal.org.uk/england/brexit/](http://politicalanimal.org.uk/england/brexit/)

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