



Food labelling and animal welfare

TOGETHER WE CAN... IMPROVE FARM ANIMAL WELFARE

Key facts...

- ★ Consumers require clear labelling of food to ensure that their aspirational choices on animal welfare can be turned into actual purchasing behaviour and makes it possible for producers of higher welfare standards to gain due recognition.
- ★ There are three main types of labelling: country of origin (COOL), method of production, and method of slaughter.
- ★ The RSPCA wishes to see mandatory method of production labelling - as currently exists on shell eggs - for all animal products.
- ★ In addition, whilst slaughter without pre-stunning remains permissible under the law, mandatory method of slaughter labelling should be introduced so that all meat from animals that have not been stunned is labelled.
- ★ Mandatory schemes can be compatible with the global trade rules and so avoid real or perceived problems of discrimination against products being imported from other countries.

Introduction

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. Currently this is not necessarily the case. Although some limited mandatory labelling does exist in the UK, on country of origin, the RSPCA would like to see this extended to method of production and method of slaughter labelling as well to ensure that consumers are getting an accurate picture of the meat they are eating.

Types of Labelling

1. Country of origin

Country of origin labelling (COOL) simply provides consumers with clear information as to where their food has come from. COOL is already mandatory for meat under EU law: beef and veal must be labelled by the country where the animal was born, the country of fattening and the country of slaughter, meat from pigs, sheep and poultry must be labelled by the country of fattening and the country of slaughter. The Government has indicated that all EU law will be carried over into UK law under the Great Repeal Bill so these rules on COOL will continue to apply after Brexit.

2. Method of production

Method of production labelling identifies the farming system used to produce the food and helps consumers make an informed choice about which production methods to support through their purchases. This form of labelling has existed for shell eggs since 2004.

3. Method of slaughter

Method of slaughter labelling identifies whether an animal was stunned (ie rendered insensible to pain) before it was slaughtered. Scientific research indicates that the slaughter of an animal without pre-stunning can cause unnecessary suffering¹ and the RSPCA would like to see all animals stunned before slaughter. Whilst slaughter without pre-stunning remains permissible under the law, mandatory labelling should be

¹ FAWC 2003. Welfare of farmed animals at slaughter and killing - part 1 red meat animals.

introduced so that all meat from animals that have not been stunned is labelled.

Why we want to see mandatory method of production and slaughter labelling

As outlined above, currently UK meat must be labelled by country of origin and shell eggs by method of production. The RSPCA would like to see the Government, who have previously felt that they could go no further with mandatory labelling because of EU competence in this area, using the opportunities presented by Brexit to introduce mandatory method of production and method of slaughter labelling for all animal products.

There is a wealth of evidence that suggests that method of production labelling is something that consumers like and is effective in driving higher welfare purchasing behaviour. This form of labelling has existed for shell eggs since 2004 and is generally considered to have contributed to the significant shift away from eggs from caged hens, allowing growth of the cage-free industry and making a huge contribution to farm animal welfare in the UK.

This is reinforced by the growth of higher welfare purchasing. For example, the number of laying hens under the RSPCA's own higher welfare scheme for which we set the welfare standards - RSPCA Assured - has risen from 24% of the UK flock in 2004 to over 51% in 2016 (constituting the vast majority of non-caged egg production), as sales of free range eggs increased. In the same time period the numbers of pigs under the scheme has risen from 17% to 28% of the UK herd, and the majority of Scottish farmed Atlantic salmon sold in the UK will have been produced to RSPCA welfare standards.

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.

Mandatory method of production and slaughter labelling would also help provide a fair and positive future for farmers who are prepared to invest in higher welfare systems and contribute to the development of the unique brand appeal of British food as the Government seeks to negotiate new trade deals and market access post-Brexit.

Labelling and WTO rules

The RSPCA believes that voluntary and mandatory labelling is acceptable under the WTO and that each WTO member should decide its level of information provision. Two mandatory labelling schemes for eggs (the Swiss and EU schemes) have been notified to the WTO and have not been challenged.

The ongoing WTO dispute between the USA and Mexico over the USA's dolphin safe tuna labelling scheme has also provided some clarity. In the latest ruling in this case, in which the USA sought to ban imports of Mexican tuna because of fishing methods that harmed dolphins, the WTO found against the USA but in doing so affirmed that Government labelling schemes are allowed to inform the consumer, are allowed on

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any animal, can set a threshold higher than a international standard but must treat all products from all countries the same.

In addition, consumer preference can also have some impact on the interpretation of agricultural rules in any trade disputes at WTO level. For example, measures highlighting how a product is produced may be allowed under the Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement (TBT) based on consumer preference.