

Fish Welfare

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On May 12th, 2021, the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) published its Action Plan for Animal Welfare. This plan outlines the Government's aims and ambitions for animal welfare domestically and internationally. It mentions several improvements that the Government would like to introduce, such as banning the live export of animals for slaughter and fattening, and taking forward legislation on puppy smuggling. The Humane League UK (THL UK) welcomes this plan, but the organisation is concerned that it does not mention the welfare of farmed fishes or their treatment at the time of killing.

In the UK, fishes are farmed in huge numbers, second only to broiler chickens, with up to 77 million farmed fishes slaughtered every year. The science indicates that slaughter without stunning, such as through live gutting or asphyxiation, can cause fish extreme pain and prolonged suffering. **There are, however, no explicit requirements for the stunning of fishes at the time of slaughter in the UK.**

Under The Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing Regulations (WATOK) England (2015), fishes must be spared any "avoidable pain, distress or suffering during their killing and related operations." However, there are no further details on what constitutes "avoidable pain". Fishes are also not included in the definition of 'animal' for the purpose of the more detailed provisions in WATOK. This means there are no specific requirements on how suffering can be avoided during slaughter.

This is markedly different to the case of terrestrial farm animals, which all have detailed requirements in law for their treatment at the time of slaughter. This vague regulatory framework for fishes means that there are no real requirements at slaughter and that there is significant scope for abuse. Recent investigations by [Animal Equality](#) and [Viva!](#) highlight the cruelty many fishes experience at the time of killing.

The Action Plan for Animal Welfare states that "following our recent review of the welfare at

slaughter legislation...[DEFRA] will be considering what further welfare at slaughter improvements should be made."

Therefore, THL UK is calling on the Government to amend the existing WATOK legislation to explicitly state the requirement to stun fishes at the time of slaughter, and to provide detailed information on stunning methods and how fishes must be treated at the time of killing. This change was recommended by the DEFRA Farmed Animal Welfare Committee (FAWC) in 2014 and will bring the legislative requirements for fishes in line with the legislative requirements for terrestrial farm animals.

The Government's Action Plan for Animal Welfare states that "our departure from the EU has provided us with an opportunity to do things better[...] We will continue to raise the bar, and we intend to take the rest of the world with us." However, several European countries have already introduced legal stunning requirements for fishes ahead of the UK. Even Norway, the world's largest producer of salmon, has regulations which require fishes to be electrically stunned at the time of killing.

Therefore, if the UK is to live up to its commitment to be at the forefront of animal welfare standards globally, it must introduce detailed legislative requirements for the stunning of fishes at the time of slaughter.