

# POLICY BACKGROUND

## Policy-relevant issues in Aquaculture & Fisheries

### Fish Welfare



## General introduction to the Policy background of Aquaculture Welfare projects

### Societal and political background<sup>1</sup>

The Commission has been developing animal welfare legislation for over 30 years and has been at the forefront of initiatives to promote this internationally by its active participation in, and support for, initiatives of the Council of Europe and more recently the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

The European Commission's activities in this area start with the recognition that animals are sentient beings. The general aim is to ensure that animals do not endure avoidable pain or suffering, and obliges the owner/keeper of animals to respect minimum welfare requirements.

Looking back, the first Community legislation on farm animal welfare was adopted in 1974 and concerned the stunning of animals before slaughter. Respecting the five basic freedoms (freedom from discomfort, from hunger and thirst, from fear and distress, from pain, injury and disease and freedom to express natural behaviour) is a fundamental principle underlying measures to protect animal welfare and the EU has already taken various practical steps to secure real improvements in animal welfare.

In this context, the Community Action Plan on the Protection and Welfare of Animals, adopted by the European Commission on 23 January 2006, embodies the Commission's commitment to EU citizens, stakeholders, the European Parliament and the Council for a clear map of the Commission's planned animal welfare initiatives for the coming years.

It also responds to the principles set out by the Protocol on Protection and Welfare of animals annexed to the EC Treaty by the Amsterdam Treaty. This Protocol recognises that animals are sentient beings and obliges the European Institutions to pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals when formulating and implementing Community legislation.

### Welfare of fish

Traditionally, the welfare of fish compared to welfare of other, land farmed animals has not been an important topic to consumers, producers and legislators, an attitude which is reflected in past research projects and legislation directed towards welfare, which hardly ever took fish into consideration. So why were - and still are - fish, compared to other animals, not a hot topic regarding welfare concerns?

Firstly, there is a lack of tradition in perceiving fish as sentient beings, as fish do not evoke compassion and concern in humans in the same way other, warm-blooded animals do; secondly, there is still no consensus among scientists whether fish are able to perceive pain and to suffer; thirdly, large scale, industrialised aquaculture is a relatively recent farming method.

Nevertheless, an increased concern for the welfare of fish in general and especially in aquaculture can be noticed in recent years, stimulated by research results suggesting the awareness of pain and suffering, and reports on farming conditions detrimental to health and welfare.

The Treaty of Amsterdam, mentioned above, was the first document that concerns the welfare of fish.

Meanwhile the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) established workgroups to work on the protection of fish welfare.

Eight years later the new Constitution, which was adopted in June 2004, contains a reworded article on the protection and welfare of animals. The word “fisheries” was added, the text being “in formulating and implementing the Union’s agriculture, fisheries, transport, internal market, research and technological development and space policies, the Union and the Member States shall pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals, as sentient beings...”.

The recent re-wording of the welfare article, now including fisheries, illustrates the increased focus on welfare issues in fisheries made by European legislation.

### Documents

There are four documents that have, at the moment, the most influence on the welfare issues within the European Aquaculture industry:

1. **Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. A strategy for the sustainable development of European Aquaculture.** Brussels 19.9.2002 - COM(2002) 511 final
2. The Council of Europe adopted the proposal of the ‘**Recommendations for Farmed Fish**’ made by the Standing Committee of the European Convention on the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes (5 December 2005) which entered into force on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2006.
3. “**Animal Welfare in Europe: achievements and future prospects**”. The Council of Europe (CoE), the European Union (EU) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) adopted in June 2006 a joint declaration on animal welfare in Europe. It commits the Council of Europe, the OIE and the European Union to provide mutual support and cooperating on all aspects of animal welfare, from the elaboration of legislation, to the training of veterinary professionals and para-professionals, to raising public awareness of the societal value of animal welfare. The important link between animal welfare and the need for adequate scientific and veterinary expertise is stressed in the document. Furthermore, the Declaration commits to efficiently assisting countries to comply with, develop or enforce animal welfare laws, standards and guidelines at a national level.
4. **European Convention for the protection of animals during International Transport** This revised Convention was adopted by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers on 11 June 2003. In June 2004 the EU signed the Council of Europe European Convention for the protection of animals during International Transport. It entered into force on 14 March 2006.

### Main institutions that are working on issues related to welfare in aquaculture:

#### **The Council of Europe (CoE)**

It has worked on the recommendations on

- Fish Welfare, main text was finished last year and come into force in June 2006. Following this, work has started on elaboration of the different annexes for individual species, the first to be analysed were salmon and trout. A separate annex on emergency killing has also been prepared. Future work is anticipated on carp, seabass and seabream and eel.
- European Convention for the protection of animals during International Transport

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**The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)** (166 member countries).

The OIE gives priority to the welfare of animals used in agriculture and aquaculture, and states that, within that group, the topics of transportation, humane slaughter and killing for disease control purposes would be addressed first, followed by housing and management. Other topics, such as research animals and wildlife, would be addressed as resources permitted.

A permanent Working Group on Animal Welfare was instituted in 2002. The Working Group saw as its primary task the development of policies and guiding principles to provide a sound foundation from which to elaborate draft recommendations and standards for the identified priorities.

**The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)** provides independent scientific advice on all matters linked to food and feed safety. It includes animal health and welfare and provides scientific advice in relation to Community legislation. The EFSA Scientific Panel on **Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW)** deals with questions on all aspects of animal health and animal welfare, primarily relating to food producing animals including fish

AHAW has published two documents on welfare issues, which also concern farmed fish:

1. Opinion of the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare on a request from the Commission related to the welfare of animals during transport, adopted on 30 March 2004
2. Scientific report on “welfare aspects of animal stunning and killing methods”, adopted on 15 June 2004

### **The European Commission**

- DG Health and Consumer Protection is responsible for food safety issues covering the whole production chain, including animal health and welfare.
- DG Fisheries and Maritime Affairs is the Directorate-General responsible for the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), which covers all fishing activities, the farming of living aquatic resources, and their processing and marketing.

The Framework Programmes have supported research projects on welfare related topics, which should contribute to providing a scientific basis for policymaking.

### **EC research projects on welfare issues**

Research on animal welfare has been funded and supported by the European Commission in the different research Framework programmes. The summaries (Technical Leaflets) on 5 past and current research projects related to welfare issues in aquaculture are given in the following pages of this section.

- ASTFISH
- AQUAFIRST
- FINEFISH
- WELLFISH
- WEALTH

### **Footnote**

1. This section has been abridged from a variety of Commission publications but principally the report “Farmed fish and welfare” created by Tania Wolffrom and Mario Lopes Dos Santon in 2004.