

Editorial

Legal loophole remains a problem

NON-stun slaughter of livestock is banned in the UK – except in cases where the intention is to provide food for Muslims or Jews.

Why should followers of these two religions be exempt from a rule everyone else adheres to?

It's a fair question, and the frustrations of secularists are not helped by what was arguably an overly liberal interpretation of religious freedom in the first place.

Since at least the 1930s, legislators in the UK have sought to balance animal welfare with the right to practise one's religion. Hence, lawmakers decided it was important to permit kosher (shechita) and halal (dhabihah) slaughter. Yet neither Islam nor Judaism actually oblige their adherents to eat meat, and many practising Muslims accept pre-slaughter stunning, so it's hard to argue that forcing Muslims and Jews to follow the same rule as everyone else would, in and of itself, prevent them from practising their religion.

The veterinary profession has, to its credit, been vocal in spite of attempts by some religious groups to shut down this debate.

The issue is in the spotlight again because of a Food Standards Agency (FSA) report which shows non-stun slaughter is increasing in the UK and some non-stun meat is even being exported to countries that have themselves banned the practice.

The BVA wants non-stun slaughter banned in the UK. It is concerned about growing numbers of animals, particularly sheep, being slaughtered using non-stun methods. The latest figures from the FSA indicate that a quarter of all sheep killed in English and Welsh slaughterhouses are dispatched without any form of stunning. This is around three million sheep annually being slaughtered without stunning.

Compare this with the situation five years ago, when 15 per cent of all sheep slaughtered in England and Wales were killed by non-stun methods. The UK Muslim and orthodox Jewish populations have grown in size since then, so that might account for the rise. However, the majority of halal sheep meat comes from animals that are in fact stunned, and only 0.1 per cent of sheep are slaughtered by shechita. Of all the non-stun halal sheep meat produced in the UK, at least 24 per cent is exported for consumption by people outside of

the UK. This has led some to conclude that exports are driving the increase.

If so, what can be done? Banning such exports would be difficult. The vast majority of exported UK non-stun sheep meat currently goes to other EU countries like France and Belgium (the FSA says none goes outside the EU, but the destination for around 7 per cent is unknown, meaning we can't be sure). Free movement of goods is a core

component of the single market, so creating new barriers to trade within the EU is frowned upon – hence why a ban up until now has been unlikely to succeed.

Post-Brexit the UK could end up having more freedom to ban the export of non-stun meat but, simultaneously, less inclination to do so because of

emphasis on trade with non-European countries, some of which prefer non-stun meat.

However, the varying requirements of different non-European countries could act as a driver for the introduction of new abattoir techniques like microwave energy stunning, which uses electromagnetic radiation to induce heatstroke in animals. This exciting technology is being developed in Australia and could potentially prove acceptable to halal authorities in Malaysia and Indonesia (see page 256).

In the absence of any desire on the part of the UK government to ban non-stun slaughter, and with the number of sheep being killed without prior stunning rising, perhaps the best bet in the short term would be to try to understand religious concerns and, where possible, negate them by way of technology.

Dialogue would also help build confidence that most people concerned about this issue bear no ill will towards Muslims and Jews, they merely wish to ensure the best animal welfare at slaughter.

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Are exports driving the increase in non-stun meat?