

Certificates must only be signed if welfare is OK

By Josh Loeb

THE Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) is warning its members not to sign export health certificates for consignments of live animals – unless they can be sure of good animal welfare en route.

The organisation, which represents veterinary bodies from 40 countries, including the UK, suggested vets could be held criminally liable if they sign but animal welfare in transit is uncertain.

The intervention, which came earlier this month as a ship from Kuwait docked in Romania to collect some 70,000 live sheep for transport to the Middle East, is regarded as highly significant by welfare campaigners.

The sheep were due to be slaughtered for a religious festival, and senior figures in the EU had – in vain – urged Romania to halt the transport.

If the FVE's call is heeded, it would likely spell an end to all live exports from Europe to countries in Africa and the Middle East.

In an unusually strongly worded statement, the FVE warned vets of the 'urgent need' to 'respect agreed laws'.

It said that in hot summers animals being exported to North Africa and the Middle East were being left stuck in lorries at the EU's borders, without proper space to rest and with only 'very limited' access to water, food and care. This was leading, the FVE said, to 'exhaustion and sometimes even death.'

In cases where transporters flout laws specifying maximum driving periods, rest stops and protection of the animals from extreme heat, vets could potentially be held liable for illegality if their signature is on the relevant paperwork.

In 2015, an EU court ruled that the provisions of the bloc's regulations on the protection of animals during transport apply even after a consignment has left

EU territory. However, this appears to have made no material difference, since live exports continue to take place from the EU to countries with very poor animal welfare.

So far no vets are known to have refused to sign an export health certificate on the basis of the FVE's warning this month.

The UK only exports consignments of livestock to continental Europe – although there are occasional exports of high-value breeding livestock to non-EU countries, and there are worldwide poultry exports from the UK as day-old chicks.

But some Mediterranean and eastern European EU member states export to North Africa or the Middle East, where welfare is known to breach EU regulations.

In the summer of 2018 alone there were more than 500 such consignments sent from the EU to these 'third countries' – a situation the FVE believes is morally and legally indefensible at present.

'This cannot go on,' the FVE said, adding: 'It is not acceptable to risk serious animal health and welfare problems...when at the start of the journey it is clear that problems are likely to occur.'

Because livestock cannot travel without an export health certificate, a veterinary boycott of the kind advocated by the FVE would likely bring an end to the EU's live export trade to the Middle East and Africa.

The FVE, whose policy on long-distance transport is supported by the BVA, said official veterinarians (OVs) should only approve loading of animals onto transport vehicles if they are sufficiently sure that legal requirements, such as journey length, can be ensured 'up to the point of destination'.

In addition, all EU countries



should avoid long-distance export of animals when temperatures exceed 30 degrees. Temperatures in the Middle East are known to exceed 40 degrees.

Vet Nancy De Briyne, from the FVE, cited a legal opinion that concluded that an OV could be held criminally culpable if he or she stamped documents for animals destined for countries where there was a known 'high risk' regarding welfare.

Last week Vytenis Andriukaitis, the member of the European Commission in charge of livestock issues, suggested the EU should 'stop live animal exports completely' if relevant law continued to be flouted.

Compassion in World Farming wrote to Andriukaitis to try and hold him to that.

The charity said the EU 'should either now ensure that live exports are conducted in accordance with the letter, spirit and purpose of [the law] or, as you [Andriukaitis] said, we should "stop live animal exports completely".'

At the time of going to press Andriukaitis had neither followed through with a live exports ban, nor launched infringement proceedings to force Romania to comply with EU law. ●



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