Meeting with DG SANCO
in Brussels on the 22nd of November, 2006

Summary of

The abuse of “downer” animals during transport and related operations
“Dairy” cows

Most “dairy” cattle are raised under intensive conditions, fed high-protein diets and are genetically selected for extremely high milk yields. As a result, “dairy” cows often suffer from diseases of their legs, mastitis, metritis, metabolic diseases (e.g. ketosis, milk fever) and calving paralysis, among other impairments of their health.

Unlike animals fattened for their meat, which are sent for slaughter when they are at their optimal size and health, “dairy” cows are “culled” for slaughter when they start showing signs of exhaustion and weakness. Normal signs of exhaustion include the following: milk production levels drop, reproductive performance drops, illness and injury. Considering this, the welfare problems during the transport of “dairy” cows start right at the point of loading because they are already in an “undesirable” condition. Numerous “dairy” cows even become “downers” on the farm or on the truck. A downer is an animal which is unable to rise on his or her own muscle-power. Most often, this condition is due to complications of a primary disease (e.g. milk fever, or mastitis), injury from falling on a slippery floor, or problems related to calving. Bulls can also become downers, in their case it is almost always due to fractures resulting from falls. The highest occurrence of downers, however, is among the “dairy” cows.

After having repeatedly observed downer cows and “dairy” cows in poor condition on markets in Portugal, Spain and Holland, Animals’ Angels decided to investigate more thoroughly. Therefore, in 2005, Animals’ Angels inspectors conducted investigations focusing solely on the handling of “dairy” cows. These investigations took place in a number of Member States, namely Holland, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany and Belgium. Results from these investigations show that there are serious welfare problems facing these animals on livestock markets, during transport and in slaughterhouses.

Animals’ Angels observed and continues to observe weak and sick cows arrive at livestock markets with:

1. leaking udders
2. strawberry foot
3. mastitis
4. swollen joints
5. broken legs
6. “spread” hind legs
7. large facial growths and abscesses on body
8. severe lameness

These cows are routinely being accepted at livestock markets by the market authorities and the official veterinarians, although the risk that they become “downers” at the market or during transport following the market is very high since they arrive in a very poor condition. In Holland, Spain and Portugal Animals’ Angels observed numerous “dairy” cows become “downers” while at the market. In Portugal and Holland we even observed cows arriving already as downers at the markets. Shockingly, these “downer” cows were, in most cases, further loaded and transported instead of being humanely killed there where they first went down. (see photo above, taken at Pola de Siero, Spain).

Animals’ Angels also repeatedly observed downers at slaughterhouses we visited in Portugal, Italy, Spain, Germany and Holland. These downers were accepted by the food business operators and by the official veterinarians of the slaughterhouses. In most cases the slaughterhouse veterinarians did not take any dissuasive measures against this happening in the future, such as sanctioning the transporter or the sender of the downer cow. Animals’ Angels also observed “downer” cows at slaughterhouses being dragged down from the truck by chains attached to their legs while fully conscious. As well, we have observed “downer” cows being left, still alive, in the parking lot or near the kill floor of slaughterhouses waiting for their turn to be slaughtered – in one case for even longer than 2 hours.
Pigs

Animals’ Angels investigated into the transport of “downer” pigs exclusively in France. In 3 out of 3 French slaughterhouses visited, we observed the arrival of non-ambulatory or injured pigs. Those animals were dragged out of the trucks and dragged up a ramp and along the slaughterhouse corridors, while still fully conscious, by chains attached to one leg. One sow observed had a broken leg, and the slaughterhouse employee purposely dragged her by her broken leg to avoid damaging the “still good meat” of her other non-injured leg. At one plant, the largest in all of France, injured pigs with either difficulty walking or completely non-ambulatory were kicked, dragged and pulled to the end of the loading dock and then given a final shove making them drop over 1 metre into an aluminium container attached to a tractor. This tractor transported the sick and injured pigs to a separate kill floor located around the corner of the plant.

Legislation

According to the current EU animal-transport legislation (Council Directive 91/628/EEC as amended), the transport of downer animals and severely ill or injured animals is illegal for journeys of over 50 km. In addition, according to the EU legislation on the protection of animals at the time of slaughter or killing (Council Directive 93/119/EC) it is illegal to transport injured or ill animals to slaughterhouses, if the transport causes further suffering - even if the distance to the slaughterhouse is less than 50 km.

In our opinion, it is obvious, that the loading of a downer cow or adult pig does cause further suffering in all cases and thus should be stopped by all means. The future animal-welfare-during-transport regulation 1/2005 (applicable as from 05.01.2007) states very clearly that: „Animals that are unable to move independently without pain or to walk unassisted shall not be considered fit for transport“. Animals Angels firmly believes that the described serious welfare dilemma is largely ignored in major parts of the livestock and meat industry, and we have to add that food business operators and official veterinarians very often do not act as required by law.

These welfare problems need to be recognized and dealt with in an appropriate and timely manner. Most importantly, downer animals and sick/injured animals at risk of going down during transport must not be transported to markets or slaughterhouses, but instead be humanely killed at the farm.
We have to point out that, in our opinion, food business operators as well as official veterinarians that allow downer animals to enter the premises of a slaughterhouse, to be slaughtered for human consumption, support activities that are in violation of existing animal welfare legislation. These persons should therefore be instructed by their competent national authorities not to allow downer animals to be slaughtered for human consumption. The food business operator and the official veterinarian should take corrective measures as required by regulations (EC) No 854/2004 and (EC) No 853/2004 and order the downer animals to be euthanized on the truck after arrival at the slaughterhouse and their carcass destroyed.

We also point out that downer animals are “animals that show symptoms of disease” according to regulation (EC) No. 853/2004 (Annex III, Section I, Chapter I, Number 2) and are thus not allowed to be transported to a slaughterhouse without the authorisation of the competent authority. We know from our experience in the field that such authorisations do not exist in the majority of cases. This is another reason why the competent national authorities should intervene and forbid slaughtering downer animals for human consumption.

**Necessary measures:**

**Holdings:**
- Send animals for slaughter before they become downers
- Increased veterinary on-farm inspections
- Have downer animals or animals that might become downers during transport, as well as severely ill or injured animals slaughtered/euthanized at the farm

**Markets:**
- Seriously ill or injured animals must not be accepted
- Veterinarian inspects unloading and reloading
- Slaughter or euthanize animals that become “downers” on the market

**Slaughterhouses:**
- Stun „downer“ animals on board the truck
- Veterinarians take appropriate measures against the transport companies and owners that send downer animals and notify the veterinarian at place of departure
- Refuse doing business with those suppliers, who repeatedly deliver animals that are not fit for transport

**Animals’ Angels asks the Commission Services to discuss this serious problem with the competent authorities of the European Member States and to insist that the Member States develop adequate programs to guarantee that downer animals or animals at risk of going down during transport are killed at the farm.**

Even though Animals’ Angels investigated the issue only in a number of Member States, it must be presumed that the described problems occur – to a greater or lesser extent - in all Member States.

Animals’ Angels would appreciate, if the FVO during its missions put reinforced attention on the way in which the problem of “downer” animals is handled.
Annexes:

- France – “Downer” pigs: Investigation at 3 slaughterhouses, April and October 2006
- Portugal – “Downer” cows: Investigation at the animal market at San Pedro de Rates, 2005 - 2006
- Italy – “Investigation into the transport of downer bovines in Italy, November 2005 to June 2006”
- Netherlands – “Shortcomings in the enforcement of the EU animal transport directive in Holland and the documentation of the suffering of downer cows in Holland”
- Netherlands – Main report about the market at Leeuwarden, 2005-2006
- Netherlands - Main report about the livestock market at Utrecht, 2001-2006
- Germany - (2 reports) Observations of the slaughterhouse Euskirchen on 28.05.2004 and on 02.06.2004.
- Belgium – report about the livestock market at Saint-Andrés, near Brugge, visited in May 2005
- Spain - Problems observed in Dairy Cows at Livestock Markets in Spain, 2004 – 2006
- Letter from Ministry of Agriculture in Luxembourg on the project “Euthanasia of animals at the farm”, dated 25.09.06