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Flemish Animal Welfare Council - OPINION 28/11/2018

Shelter for animals that are kept outdoors

Flemish Animal Welfare Council opinion

The Flemish Animal Welfare Council believes that legislation must be put in place to ensure that **animals kept outdoors** (mammals and poultry) invariably **have access to shelter** (in the form of adequate planting, facilities, shelter or free access to an adjacent barn). Owners must be given a **10-year transitional period** for providing pasture and land on which their animals can graze. In the meantime, shelter must be provided during long periods of warm and cold weather at a minimum. **Clear guidelines** on suitable shelter must be available **at least 5 years** prior to the end of the transitional period. In the case of **temporary grassland** (grass sown on fields in a crop rotation of younger than a year), compulsory shelter is not required during the spring and summer.

Previous opinions

The Federal Council for Animal Welfare has already formulated opinions pertaining to animals that are kept outdoors. In 2007, the Council provided an opinion for owners of poultry, pigs, goats, sheep, horses and cattle. If these animals are kept **outdoors during the winter**, they must have access to dry bedding in a shelter that provides protection against wind and precipitation. In the **summer** they must be able to opt for **shade in the form of planting, shelters or barns**. An **exception** was proposed for **healthy cattle and horses past the age of puberty**, unless during a heatwave.

The Council devised **practical details** for **equidae** in 2010, which led to additional legislation (please see below). Due to fresh insights and developments, the Council deems it necessary that these opinions be tightened and extended to all animals that are kept outdoors.

Climate change and fresh insights and developments

The phenomenon of climate change is increasingly being felt. Meanwhile, fresh insights and scientific developments necessitate the update of existing opinions pertaining to the welfare of animals kept outdoors.

The view on animal welfare has also changed over the years. Positive welfare is gaining in significance and it is imperative that animals are provided with **choice**: animals that are kept outdoors must have the opportunity to seek shelter in order to reduce the effects of the prevailing weather conditions.¹

How well an animal endures extreme temperatures (cold and/or heat) (**thermotolerance**) depends on numerous factors such as species, breed, age, condition, productivity and condition of their coat. Thermotolerance may differ between animals, even within the same group or herd, due to their individual characteristics such as temperament and gut fill. Animals kept outdoors can suffer thermal stress from both extreme temperatures and other extreme weather conditions, such as heavy rain and strong wind.

Cattle are primarily selected for their high productivity. These animals are more susceptible to heat stress due to their high metabolism (particularly relevant in dairy cattle) and due to their limited ability to release generated heat (particularly relevant in highly muscular beef cattle). Current knowledge on the effects of extreme weather conditions on cattle on pasture indicates that shelter benefits the welfare and productivity of the animal.

So-called climate indices and associated risk classes are used to determine an animal's thermal comfort and stress based on measurements of climatological variables. The new indices factor in temperature, humidity, wind speed and solar radiation in order to assess cold and heat stress. The duration of exposure has also gained in significance in this new approach. In addition, **heat stress** in cattle also appears to be a higher risk in temperate regions - and more specifically in Belgium^{2,3} - and has a greater impact on behaviour and welfare, and on health and productivity than previously believed.

Thus, it is **additionally necessary to provide healthy cattle above the age of puberty with shelter**.

Research shows that both cattle and **horses** use shelter if it is available. It is recommended to provide shade during sunny weather, and a dry, wind-free refuge in cold, rainy and windy conditions.³

¹Boissy, A., Manteuffel, G., Jensen, M.B., Moe, R.O., Spruijt, B., Keeling, L.J., Winckler, C., Forkman, B., Dimitrov, I., Langbein, J., Bakken, M., Veissier, I., Aubert, A. 2007. Assessment of positive emotions in animals to improve their welfare. *Physiology & Behaviour* 92:375-397

²Van laer, E., Moons, C., Sonck, B., and Tuytens, F. 2014. Importance of outdoor shelter for cattle in temperate climates. *Livestock Science* 159, 87-101

³Van laer, E., and Snoeks, M. 2014. Research into the prevention of heat and/or cold stress in animals kept on pasture. Final report from RT 10/13 PASTRESS research project: 01.11.2010 – 31.10.2014. KU Leuven, Ghent University, Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research 139 pp.

Grazing offers benefits for cattle and horses. The animals must therefore be able to be kept outdoors in a suitable environment. The continuous stabling of animals must be avoided.

In line with the advice on horses kept on pasture, the Animal Welfare Act (Act of 14 August 1986 pertaining to the protection and welfare of animals) was revised and now specifies that stabling must be provided for horses that are kept outdoors. If that is not possible, then they must have access to natural shelter or a place of refuge. Audits performed by inspectors from the Animal Welfare Service of the Flemish government reveal that this regulation is not consistently adhered to, and that horses are placed on pasture without natural shelter or a place of refuge and are not stabled when necessary due to weather conditions.