



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
HEALTH AND CONSUMERS DIRECTORATE-GENERAL
Animal health and welfare
Animal Welfare

Background note on plucking/harvesting of down feathers from geese

Recently, a television programme broadcasted a report where feathers from live geese were being plucked under painful conditions.

Article 3 of Directive 98/58/EC on the welfare of farm animals¹ requires that "Member States shall make provision to ensure that the owners or keepers take all reasonable steps to ensure the welfare of animals under their care and to ensure that those animals are not caused any unnecessary pain, suffering or injury". This also reflects the principles stated in the European Convention for the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes².

The detailed applicable provisions of the Convention are specified in several Recommendations. Both the Convention and those Recommendations are part of Community law. The Recommendation on geese adopted in 1999 provides in paragraph 3 of Article 23 that "feathers, including down, shall not be plucked from live birds"³.

Given that that the Community and the Member States are obliged to give effect to the provisions of that Recommendation in the same way as they are for the Convention itself, the practice of plucking feathers from live birds is prohibited in the EU, even if Directive 98/58/EC does not make explicit reference to it.

However, the Standing Committee of the Convention distinguishes between plucking feathers, which is forbidden, and harvesting feathers which is allowed. Harvesting down feathers consists of removing feathers that are ripe due to the natural phenomenon of moulting.

It appears that Hungary has a long tradition of harvesting down feathers from live geese. In order to maintain this economic activity while respecting the rules of the Convention, the Hungarian Authorities envisaged in 2004 the possibility to deposit a formal notification at the Council of Europe, stating that they did not intend to implement paragraph 3 of Article 23 of the recommendation on geese. Upon this request, the Treaty Office of the Council of Europe stated that a notification was not necessary, considering

¹ Council Directive 98/58/EC of 20 July 1998 concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes, OJ L 221, 8.8.98, p.23.

² European Convention for the protection of animals kept for farming purposes available at the following link:

http://www.coe.int/T/E/Legal_affairs/Legal_co-operation/Biological_safety_use_of_animals/Farming/

³ Recommendation concerning geese and their crossbreds available at the following link

http://www.coe.int/t/e/legal_affairs/legal_co-operation/biological_safety_use_of_animals/farming/Rec%20geese.asp#TopOfPage

that the practice of harvesting feathers when they are ripe is different from the practice of plucking feathers.

At the meeting of the Chief Veterinary Officers of 11 February 2009, the Hungarian CVO confirmed that the practice of plucking feathers as shown on a Swedish television programme broadcasted on 1 February 2009, is forbidden in Hungary, and constituted an isolated case of cruelty towards animals which will be thoroughly investigated.

The Commission will request information from the Hungarian Authorities on the results of their investigation of this particular case and write to MS to gather additional information on the practice of harvesting down feathers.

The Commission will discuss further technical details on this issue at the next SCoFCAH meeting on 3 March 2009.