

PRESS RELEASE

06/2020

Berlin, 16 June 2020

German Ethics Council calls for greater consideration of animal welfare in livestock management

In its Opinion published today, the German Ethics Council calls for considerable reforms in order to achieve minimum standards of ethically acceptable animal husbandry.

The relationship between humans and (farm) animals is characterised by underlying tensions: In recent years, animal welfare and animal rights have increasingly been discussed in Germany. Social acceptance for many practices in livestock management is declining. Current law contains, at least at first glance, strict requirements concerning animal welfare. Nevertheless, under the given husbandry conditions, farm animals are often routinely subjected to pain and suffering. Reform efforts merely address partial aspects and/or come to nothing.

In its Opinion “Respecting Animal Welfare – On the Responsible Treatment of Farm Animals”, the German Ethics Council examines to what extent legal and factual ambiguities and incoherencies – identified in specific sectors – can be reduced by means of rational ethical reflection. The Council identifies an overlapping consensus regarding basic guidelines of animal ethics and, based on these, principles for ethically responsible treatment of livestock. As a result, a need for a comprehensive structural change in animal husbandry has to be stated.

The Opinion emphasises that at least more highly developed animals have an “intrinsic value”. This implies a particular worthiness of protection and a particular human responsibility. It sets limits to human interests in animal use. According to the Ethics Council, however, these limits are regularly exceeded in current practice. The Council therefore calls for giving much greater consideration to animal welfare and for a more respectful treatment of animal life. Accordingly, the following principles should be observed in particular:

- 1) The protection and promotion of animal welfare must be understood as a far-reaching obligation: All farm animals should be given the possibility to thrive and feel as well as possible throughout their lives, in accordance with their species-specific forms of behaviour and possibilities of experience.
- 2) Avoidable pain and suffering must not be inflicted on animals. Economic considerations alone are not sufficient to accept the suffering and pain of farm animals as “unavoidable”.
- 3) The conditions of breeding, keeping and utilisation, including the killing of farm animals, must be justified with good reasons. In doing so, it is not permitted to refer to the (nutritional) needs of humans in a generalised way.
- 4) Respect for the life of animals also demands a generally mindful and sparing approach to animal life. This principle is violated if certain farm animals are discarded and killed simply because of their lower economic yields.

Members

Prof. Dr. med. Alena Buyx (Chair)
 Prof. Dr. iur. Dr. h. c. Volker Lipp (Vice Chair)
 Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h. c. Julian Nida-Rümelin (Vice Chair)
 Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Susanne Schreiber (Vice Chair)

Prof. Dr. iur. Steffen Augsberg
 Regional bishop Dr. theol. Petra Bahr
 Prof. Dr. theol. Franz-Josef Bormann
 Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Hans-Ulrich Demuth
 Prof. Dr. iur. Helmut Frister
 Prof. Dr. phil. habil. Dr. phil. h. c. lic. phil. Carl Friedrich Gethmann
 Prof. Dr. theol. Elisabeth Gräß-Schmidt
 Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Dr. phil. Sigrid Graumann
 Prof. Dr. med. Wolfram Henn
 Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Ursula Klingmüller
 Stephan Kruijff
 Prof. Dr. phil. Dr. h. c. Dipl.-Psych. Andreas Kruse
 Prof. Dr. theol. Andreas Lob-Hüdepohl
 Prof. Dr. phil. habil. Annette Riedel
 Prof. Dr. iur. Stephan Rixen
 Prof. Dr. iur. Dr. phil. Frauke Rostalski
 Prof. Dr. theol. Kerstin Schlögl-Flierl
 Dr. med. Josef Schuster
 Prof. Dr. phil. Judith Simon
 Jun.-Prof. Dr. phil. Muna Tatari

Press Contact

Ulrike Florian
 Phone: +49 (0)30/203 70-246
 Fax: +49 (0)30/203 70-252
 Email: florian@ethikrat.org

Office

Jaegerstrasse 22/23
 D-10117 Berlin
 Phone: +49 (0)30/203 70-242
 Fax: +49 (0)30/203 70-252
 Email: kontakt@ethikrat.org
 Website: www.ethikrat.org

- 5) The basic protection standards laid down in the Animal Welfare Act are in line with the ethical requirements set out in the Opinion or can at least be understood in this sense. Nevertheless, consideration should be given to better implement the principles of animal welfare in animal welfare legislation, for example by reversing the burden of justification and making greater use of animal welfare-related indicators.
- 6) Animal welfare-oriented provisions of the Animal Welfare Act must not be undermined by way of interpretation or sub-legal concretisation. The process of concretising the law requires clear procedural standards that guarantee legally binding results, with transparent participation structures that adequately “represent” animals and their legitimate needs. Institutionalised conflicts of interest and one-sided appointments must be avoided.
- 7) The special value of farm animal-based products must be recognised. Furthermore, substitute products are to be promoted. The increasing consumer demand for plant-based meat substitutes is to be welcomed as an indirect contribution to animal welfare.

The task of implementing the morally required respect for animal welfare in practice concerns our entire society. In order to fulfil it, it is not enough to appeal to the responsibility of consumers alone. Rather, all relevant actors must be included in a results-oriented discourse.

Ethically responsible treatment of (farm) animals is first and foremost a question of responsible regulation. The role of politics is to design an appropriately structured transformation process. In this process, it must be ensured that the expected burdens of such a structural change are distributed fairly.

The full text of the Opinion (in German) is available at <https://www.ethikrat.org/fileadmin/Publikationen/Stellungnahmen/deutsch/stellungnahme-tierwohlachtung.pdf>.