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## Coordinated European Animal Welfare Network (EUWelNet)

### Executive summary

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#### **Title**

Executive summary of the project **Coordinated European Animal Welfare Network (EUWelNet)**

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## Call for proposals SANCO 2012/10293

# The EuWelNet project points the way towards a European Network of Reference Centres for Animal Welfare

## Context

The creation of a European Centre for the protection and welfare of animals was first suggested in the Community Action Plan on the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2006-2010<sup>1</sup>. The idea was elaborated in 2009 in a European Commission report<sup>2</sup>. This was accompanied by an impact assessment<sup>3</sup>, in which the Commission proposed a European Network of Reference Centres for Animal Protection and Welfare (ENRC) building on existing resources. The European Parliament<sup>4</sup> considered that a European coordinated network for animal welfare should be set up under the existing EU or Member State institutions and that the network should designate one institution as the coordinating body.

In 2013 the Commission adopted a proposal on official controls<sup>5</sup> where ‘reference centres for animal welfare’ are defined to support the activities of the Commission and of the Member States in relation to the application of the rules laying down welfare requirements for animals.

The foreseen tasks of these centres are:

- providing scientific and technical expertise (e.g. related to specific legislation or the development and application of animal welfare indicators);
- developing methods for the assessment and improvement of the welfare of animals used for commercial or scientific purposes;
- conducting training courses for the benefit of national scientific support staff, of staff of the competent authorities and of experts from third countries;
- disseminating research findings and technical innovations and collaborating with EU research bodies in the fields within the scope of their mission.

These tasks are very similar to the ones suggested in the EU animal welfare strategy 2012-2015<sup>6</sup>. However, the proposed Regulation does not specifically describe or define a coordinating structure for the reference centres for animal welfare.

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<sup>1</sup> Community Action Plan on the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2006-2010 (COM(2006) 13)

<sup>2</sup> Options for animal welfare labelling and the establishment of a European Network of Reference Centres for the protection and welfare of animals. COM (2009) 584 final.

<sup>3</sup> Commission staff working document impact assessment report SEC(2009)1432.

<sup>4</sup> European Parliament on evaluation and assessment of the Animal Welfare Action Plan 2006-2010 (2009/2202(INI)).

<sup>5</sup> COM(2013) 265 final

<sup>6</sup> COM(2012) 6 final

In March 2010, the Commission launched a call (SANCO 2012/10293) to study the feasibility of a network of resources in order to improve the implementation of the EU legislation on animal welfare through knowledge strategies.

The call was granted to the EUWelNet team who carried out the project during 2013.

## Objectives of EUWelNet

EUWelNet investigated the feasibility of a coordinated network of resources, and had four main objectives:

1. To establish a consortium and coordinate the pilot study;
2. To identify bottlenecks/difficulties in implementing EU legislation on animal welfare;
3. To develop and test knowledge strategies;
4. To carry out an overarching analysis and formulate recommendations on the feasibility and the conditions for a European network.

## Approach

EUWelNet created a consortium of **sixteen universities** and **ten research and technical institutes** from **sixteen EU Member States**. All partners had extensive scientific expertise in relevant and complementary disciplines (ethology, veterinary medicine, animal production, sociology, etc.), experience in knowledge transfer, education, science-society dialogue, and a history of effective collaboration.

Three pieces of EU legislation were chosen as examples to focus on in the present project:

- Council Directive 2008/120/EC of 18 December 2008 laying down minimum standards for the **protection of pigs** ('pig directive').
- Council Directive 2007/43 of 28 June 2007 laying down minimum rules for the **protection of chickens** kept for meat production ('broiler directive').
- Council Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009 of 24 September 2009 on the **protection of animals at the time of killing** ('killing regulation').

One work package in the work plan was designed to **identify difficulties and bottlenecks** in implementing these legislations. Here, the organisation and structure of the implementation process were mapped in **ten focus countries** (Romania, Italy, Sweden, Slovakia, United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, France and Germany). Then, national and European inspection reports were analysed to improve understanding of the level of implementation and compliance realised. This was followed up with interviews with representatives of the relevant public and private actors in six countries (United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Poland and Romania). The interviews focused on measures taken to facilitate implementation and to address bottlenecks, considering in particular the relevance of remedial knowledge strategies and the role that a future network could play.

In a parallel work package, different types of **knowledge strategies** in relation to the three pieces of legislation **were designed and tested**. These include **web based networking tools**, an **e-learning facility**, **fact sheets and standard operating procedures**. These strategies were aimed at competent authorities, producers, veterinarians, animal welfare officers, and food business operators. Although it was not possible to conclusively determine if the strategies had an impact on the actual welfare of the animals due to the short duration of the project, their likely usefulness was assessed by:

- using questionnaires at the end of the training sessions to assess the reaction of the audience;
- comparing the results of two questionnaires, one before the training session and another one after it, to assess knowledge uptake;
- assessing the level of adoption of the standard operating procedures proposed by the project.

In other tasks a number of **existing European networks** (EFSA, ECDC etc.) **were studied as possible models** for the organisation of a future network (using website information and interviewing key representatives). **Scenarios for the organisation** of a future network on animal welfare were then built and their strengths and weaknesses were measured along five criteria: economic, political, social, organisational, and technical aspects. In addition potential members of a future network were identified from a questionnaire sent to the partners of the EUWelNet project.

As an essential complementary component of the EUWelNet knowledge network an independent **Advisory Board** (consisting of farmers, retailers, industry groups, competent authorities, non-governmental organisations etc.) was established at an early stage. The Advisory Board enabled the gathering of opinions from a wide range of relevant stakeholders, supported the consortium in gathering necessary information and feedback during the pilot study, and helped better understand the potential role and function of an Advisory Board in a future network. The Advisory Board also served to inform stakeholders about the project's progress and outputs.

Frequent interaction between consortium partners and members of the Board, two meetings of EUWelNet partners with all members of the Advisory Board, and two integration meetings of all partners enabled extensive discussion of progress, results and planning. Specific issues, such as the position of stakeholders in a future Network and the required qualifications of its members, were also discussed.

The information and knowledge generated by the above activities were used to formulate recommendations for the establishment of a future network on animal welfare.

## Results and Recommendations

The **process of implementation** of EU legislation on animal welfare **is organised differently across Member States**. Consequently, national and regional laws covering the EU directives may vary considerably. Although implementation proceeds more smoothly in some countries than in others, all of the studied countries were found to face some problems in meeting the requirements of the three studied pieces of legislations.

Stakeholder interviews revealed that **public-private collaboration plays a crucial role** in the development of support practices (e.g. applied research), facilitation of a broad dissemination of knowledge, and provision of tailor-made information and training of target groups.

In general, the **knowledge strategies tested in EUWelNet were very well received**, had a positive effect on the knowledge of the audience and showed a high degree of adoption. EUWelNet also demonstrated the value of developing different types of knowledge strategy and the benefit of producing them in different languages.

It was also shown that the interest in participating in a future network is high among knowledge providers (i.e. research institutes, universities).

Collectively, these results clearly suggest that such a coordinated network could play a significant role in overcoming difficulties and bottlenecks in the implementation of EU animal welfare legislation. The results also provided proof of principle that the efforts of a pan European network of knowledge providers can be successfully coordinated to share knowledge and technical expertise and to develop effective knowledge strategies.

The main goals of EU animal welfare legislation are to safeguard animal welfare, to ensure a level playing field between business operators and to create confidence for EU consumers concerning the welfare standards implemented.

Thus, the mission of a future Coordinated European Animal Welfare Network should be:

*to contribute to safeguarding the welfare of animals in Europe  
by supporting competent authorities and other stakeholders in the implementation of EU  
legislation*

More specific **objectives** can be described as follows:

1. To **facilitate the consistent implementation** of EU legislation by:

- identifying difficulties and bottlenecks as well as related risks for animal welfare;
- developing knowledge strategies to overcome difficulties and bottlenecks;
- developing harmonised tools to implement animal welfare legislation;
- designing and conducting training courses for staff of competent authorities and experts from third countries.

2. To **conduct and coordinate studies** on the welfare status of animals, on methods and indicators to assess welfare, and on welfare improvement strategies.

3. To **transfer the knowledge** to stakeholders by:

- increasing stakeholders' awareness, engagement and collaboration in addressing animal welfare issues, with particular focus on primary stakeholders (e.g., farmers in the case of farm animals);
- building structures and processes to actively share knowledge and expertise related to the implementation of EU legislation;
- providing scientific and technical advice to national support bodies on animal welfare risks and indicators as well as on best practices to alleviate or resolve welfare problems;
- disseminating research findings and technical innovations.

In order to meet its objectives it is important that the network implements **effective ways of working**, among which the following are considered particularly important:

- Stimulate open collaboration between members and encourage public-private cooperation.
- Realise common aims, make efficient use of resources and avoid unnecessary competition and duplication of effort. The role of a ‘General Assembly’ where all partners meet could be further formalised as a platform for discussion and strategic decision making.
- Develop, use and maintain an integral web based communication and management platform.
- Establish clearly defined procedures and structures for prioritisation and distribution of effort as well as accountability and reporting.
- Establish an external, complementary Advisory Board at an early stage. Regular interaction with the Advisory Board and intensive participation of other stakeholders in the Network’s activities would help ensure transparency and confidence in its organisation and operations.
- Develop a communication/dissemination system that ensures effective two-way flow of information between the EC, the Network and other stakeholders.

The network could be constituted with **core members and associated partners**, working on specific projects.

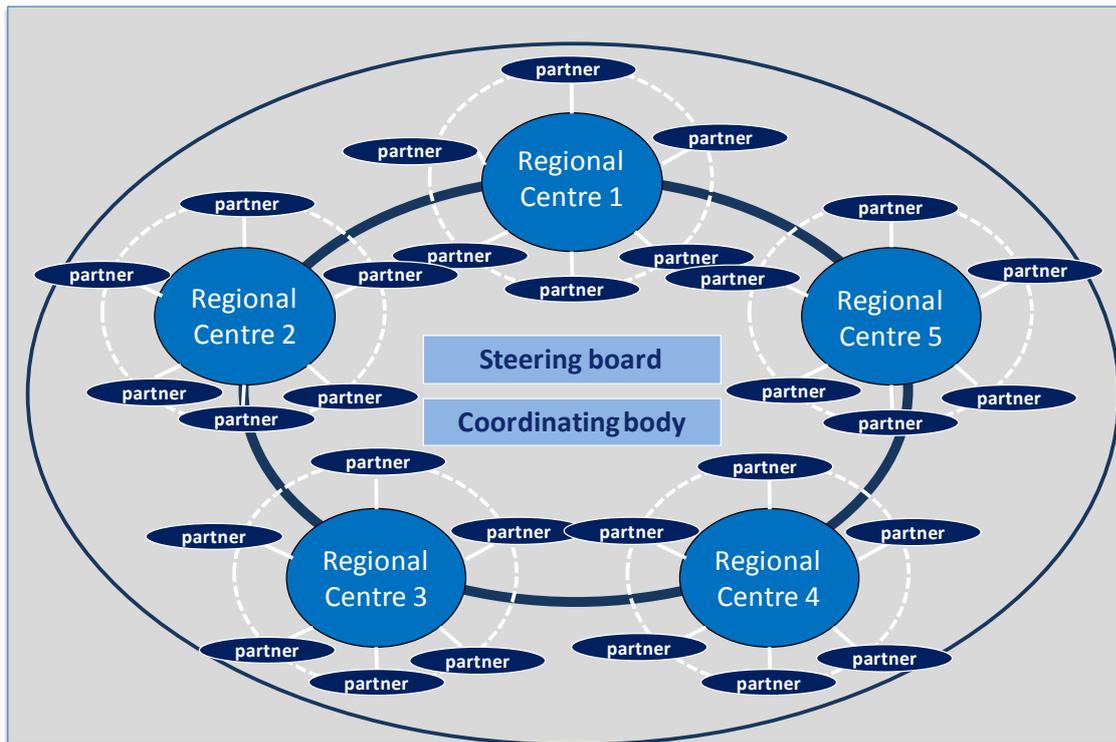
**Core members** should be impartial knowledge providers because they have a central role in the flow of information within the Member States, i.e. with the different animal welfare actors (competent authorities, producers, NGOs, existing networks etc.).

**Members and partners** must demonstrate high competence in animal welfare (publication record, research impact, educational performance, evidence of networking experience, leadership etc.) as well as an impartial awareness of industry problems and requirements. Two-way dialogue between knowledge providers and all animal welfare actors must be encouraged.

The membership should be flexible in order to:

- take into account new topics (the network should be able to include new members and establish working groups to address specific tasks);
- optimise the use of expertise available throughout the Union and take account of developments such as new centres of expertise and innovations;
- channel resources where they are needed according to the severity, scope and urgency of welfare issues, regional differences in implementation etc.

On the basis of a consideration of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various scenarios studied, we recommend an **organisation built on a ‘regional scenario’** with a few regionally based reference centres (4-5 regional centres, e.g. 1 East, 1 North, 1 South, 1 West, 1 Central Europe) who work with regional partners (see schematic illustration).



Effective collaboration and knowledge sharing requires trust. A **regional structure of the network** would reduce language barriers, and enable regional and cultural differences to be taken into account thereby supporting the development of trust among relevant actors and agencies in each region. Regional reference centres should cover all topics (species or issues) but may be specialised in a specific topic due to regional circumstances. A regional organisation does run the risk of fragmentation and isolation so effective inter-regional communication and collaboration will be essential. This scenario offers a good balance between local initiatives (based around regional reference centres) and the needs of overall coordination.

The **coordinating body** would include representatives of the Reference Centres and of the Commission. Such an organisation is considered most likely to ensure trust and confidence while also facilitating coordination and smooth communication between Member States and the Commission.

In an optimal scenario, the overall cost would be about **7.1 million euros** per year for 5 reference centres and a coordination body (detailed calculation and hypothesis are available in deliverable 6).

The EUWelNet pilot project identified three key types of activity for a future Network. These are briefly described below.

## Key activities for a future network

### Gathering information to identify problem areas and propose work plans

In order to direct and prioritise network activities, a key requirement is the identification of specific bottlenecks and difficulties in the various animal sectors that hamper implementation of legislation. Attention must be paid to the diversity among producers and regions.

Several sources of information should be used for continuous surveillance of implementation bottlenecks and welfare status across Member States, e.g. national inspection reports, European FVO audits and other welfare reports produced by responsible ministries, NGOs, animal welfare councils and scientists.

Blending the collection of existing information with proactive inventurisation of bottlenecks and problems experienced by end users (farmers, abattoirs, transporters, competent authorities) is especially important in countries with few public-private networks and where knowledge institutes have weaker relations with end users.

The coordinating body will use this information to prioritise problem areas and propose dedicated work plans for the network.

The production of statistics at EU level could also be used to benchmark specific welfare problems at regional, national or farm levels.

Including issues like sustainability, production costs, profitability etc. would allow consideration of animal welfare in a broader techno-economic context, and thereby facilitate the implementation of welfare measures.

### Sharing knowledge and producing education and information materials to overcome identified problems

Based on EUWelNet experience, the network could collect and share knowledge and expertise on:

- a) why a particular piece of legislation can improve animal welfare (e.g. why group housing is better for sow welfare),
- b) how it might be best implemented in best practice (e.g. type of manipulable material for pigs) and
- c) links between welfare improvements and likely economic, husbandry and other benefits (e.g. reduced veterinary costs, increased product quality).

Knowledge would be gathered through literature reviews, expert meetings, workshops, and regular contact with other knowledge networks, authorities, relevant organisations, stakeholders and the network's Advisory Board. Other 'knowledge' material includes best practices, training formulas and material, guidelines for implementation of specific legislation, photographs, audio-visual resources etc.

All the material would need to be regularly updated and made available in several languages.

### Ensuring dissemination and exchange of knowledge

The network would make the collective knowledge and expertise available in two main ways. First, it would develop a database (warehouse) of information on bottlenecks, welfare status and problems as well as knowledge transfer material that can be easily accessed by stakeholders. Second, using dedicated knowledge strategies the network would proactively disseminate expert knowledge to end users and intermediaries such as veterinarians, auditors and other advisors. The strategies include a range of formats appropriate to specific target audiences, e.g. interactive website, e-learning tool, training programmes, dedicated workshops, fact sheets, and submission of articles to the farming press and industry journals etc.

Knowledge transfer strategies are more likely to be appreciated and used if they encourage two-way dialogue, clarify the purpose of legislation, describe its benefits for animals and producers and clearly

explain how to implement it. For example, joint training of inspectors, farmers and veterinarians across Member States could reduce their work load, facilitate the exchange and uptake of best practices and improve harmonisation.

Subsequently, the impact of the various knowledge strategies will be evaluated at four different levels: end users' reactions, their gain in knowledge, their change in behaviour and the effects on their animals' welfare.

## Conclusions

**Societal demands** for improved farm animal welfare are **increasingly important** and must be realised within **economically viable and environmentally friendly** production systems. Effective knowledge transfer and innovative strategies are essential to satisfy the welfare requirements under these constraints.

**EUWelNet demonstrated that a coordinated network** of universities and research institutes can work successfully together and **deliver valuable support for the implementation** of European legislation on animal welfare. EUWelNet effectively identified difficulties and bottlenecks and created innovative knowledge strategies to overcome them.

A future network based on this concept would support knowledge exchange and common investment in knowledge creation among key actors and agencies across the European food-chain. It would also become a think tank and facilitator of collaboration and innovation.

This will not only **improve animal welfare** but also **enhance performance, product quality** and the **competitiveness** of European animal producers.

*In view of the outcomes of EUWelNet and the additional advantages outlined here, the consortium and its Advisory Board strongly recommend that such a network should be established, with a proper annual budget and with a mission to contribute to safeguarding and improving the welfare of animals in Europe by supporting competent authorities and other stakeholders in the implementation of EU legislation.*