



# Food labelling and animal welfare

*Ensuring animals have a good life by advocating on their behalf*

## Key facts...

- ★ Consumers have a right to know how the animals involved in the meat, eggs and dairy products they buy lived and died.
- ★ Farmers producing higher welfare products also deserve a system which allows them to promote this on their products - especially as high animal welfare standards are a huge part of the enduring appeal of British food at home and abroad.
- ★ The RSPCA wants to see mandatory method of production labelling - which describes how the animal was kept, as currently required for shell eggs - for all animal products.
- ★ In addition, as long as slaughter without pre-stunning is legal, mandatory method of slaughter labelling should be introduced so that all meat from animals that have not been stunned is clearly labelled.
- ★ Mandatory schemes can be compatible with WTO rules and so avoid real or perceived problems of discrimination against products being imported from other countries.

## Introduction

Consumers have a right to know how the animals involved in the production of the animal products they choose to buy were reared, and how they were killed. Currently this is not necessarily the case, except for shell eggs where method of production labelling is mandatory. Farmers that are investing in and producing higher welfare products also must not be disadvantaged by the lack of such labelling. The RSPCA would like to see mandatory method of production labelling for all animal products, as well as the labelling of meat from animals that have not been stunned before slaughter, ensuring consumers are empowered with the information they need to make purchasing decisions that reflect their animal welfare concerns.

## Types of Labelling

### 1. Country of origin labelling

Country of origin labelling (COOL) tells consumers where their food has come from. COOL is already mandatory for meat: beef and veal must be labelled by the country where the animal was born, the country of fattening and the country of slaughter, and meat from pigs, sheep and poultry must be labelled with the country of fattening and the country of slaughter. COOL does not provide consumers with information regarding animal welfare and cannot be used as a proxy indicator for this either.

### 2. Method of production labelling

Method of production labelling identifies and describes the primary farming system used to rear the animal - for example, free range - and helps consumers make an informed choice about which production methods to support through their purchases. This form of labelling has been a mandatory requirement for shell eggs in the UK since 2004 and has been instrumental in driving consumer awareness and purchasing of non-caged eggs. It has also helped support and recognise those farmers that have invested in higher welfare (non-cage) systems.



### 3. Method of slaughter labelling

Method of slaughter labelling does not currently exist on any animal products in the UK. Scientific research

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indicates that the slaughter of an animal without pre-stunning can cause unnecessary suffering<sup>1</sup> and, as such, the RSPCA would like to see all animals stunned before slaughter. Whilst slaughter without pre-stunning remains, mandatory labelling should be introduced so that all meat from animals that have not been stunned is labelled and clearly identifiable. A robust method of slaughter labelling system would identify in simple terms whether an animal was stunned (ie rendered insensible to pain) before it was slaughtered.

### Why we want to see mandatory method of production and slaughter labelling

Currently, meat sold in the UK must only be labelled with the country of origin, and shell eggs with method of production. The RSPCA would like to see the Government, who have previously felt that they could go no further with mandatory labelling because of EU competence in this area, use the opportunities presented by Brexit and their new powers with regards to labelling in England in the Agriculture Act to improve on this.

Method of production labelling is something that consumers actively want, and can be effective in driving higher welfare purchasing behaviour. This form of labelling has existed for shell eggs since 2004 and is generally considered to have contributed to the significant shift away from eggs from caged hens, allowing growth of the cage-free industry and making a huge contribution to farm animal welfare in the UK. This is reinforced by the growth of higher welfare purchasing. Since the introduction of mandatory labelling, cage-free eggs now account for 52% of all egg sales in the UK (up from 34% in 2003), and all UK supermarkets have pledged to only sell shell eggs from cage-free systems by 2025. We are pleased that the Government has committed to a consultation on a method of production labelling scheme and look forward to this being launched.

Currently, there is no opportunity for consumers to have information on the method of slaughter for the meat products they eat. This lack of information is failing both those who do not wish to buy meat slaughtered in this way and those who do. For example, the latest Food Standards Agency figures<sup>2</sup> show that meat from 90,000 sheep slaughtered for kosher meat were deemed 'unfit for religious consumption'. It is not clear what happened to this meat subsequently and, without labelling, we will never know if it entered the conventional market. It is also not clear whether meat labelled Halal has come from animals that have been stunned (it should be noted that the majority of meat that comes from Halal slaughter is stunned). 'Stunned' or 'Non-stunned' are appropriate, non-contentious, factual labels for meat that provide sufficient information for the consumer to make an informed choice.

### Labelling and WTO rules



The RSPCA believes both voluntary and mandatory labelling is acceptable under World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules and that each WTO member can and should decide its own labelling system to meet its domestic legal and consumer requirements. Two mandatory labelling schemes for shell eggs (the Swiss and EU schemes) have been notified to the WTO and have not been challenged.

The WTO dispute between the USA and Mexico over the USA's 'dolphin safe' tuna labelling scheme has also provided some clarity. In a key ruling in this case, in which the US sought to ban imports of Mexican tuna because of fishing methods that harmed dolphins, the WTO agreed that mandatory method of production labelling was acceptable under WTO rules. This important decision confirmed that Government labelling schemes are allowed to inform the consumer, are allowed on any animal product and can set a threshold higher than an international standard as long as they are risk-based.

<sup>1</sup> FAWC (2003) *Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter and Killing*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fawc-report-on-the-welfare-of-farmed-animals-at-slaughter-or-killing> (accessed 26/8/20)

<sup>2</sup> FSA (2018) *Farm Animals: Survey of Slaughter Methods 2018*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farm-animals-survey-of-slaughter-methods-2018> (accessed 26/8/20)

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