

## Reports and Comments

### Special Eurobarometer 442: European Commission public opinion survey into 'Attitudes of Europeans towards animal welfare'

The European Commission Directorate General for Health and Food Safety has published a large public opinion survey which it commissioned on 'Attitudes of Europeans towards animal welfare'. These surveys provide an important insight into the attitudes of the citizens of European Union countries towards animal welfare. A previous survey was conducted in 2006 and, in some cases, the current survey repeated questions from the earlier report, allowing an examination of the changes in attitudes over the preceding decade.

The survey assessed the views of some 27,000 people across all 28 member states and is chiefly focused on attitudes towards the welfare of animals farmed for food, covering three broad objectives: understanding what EU citizens understand by the term 'animal welfare', whether citizens understand the EU welfare strategy and assessment, as well as citizens' awareness of welfare-friendly products and welfare-labelling schemes and willingness-to-pay for higher welfare products.

Accompanying the main report there is a summary document that gives an overview of the main findings of the report and 28 country-level summaries. The country-level summaries provide responses to the main questions from citizens of that country benchmarked against the EU average and will be of particular use to those engaged in animal welfare in a specific country.

Some of the Europe-wide high-level conclusions outlined in the summary document from the report show widespread support for the role of the EU in promoting animal welfare, and significant support for EU-wide standards on welfare, with many viewing the EU as a gold standard whose regulations could be applied globally (nine out of ten respondents thought it important to establish standards which are applicable across the world).

The survey results are perhaps most useful where they reveal opportunities to make changes to increase animal welfare which would be easily accepted by citizens. For instance, data suggest that 59% of Europeans would pay 5% more for produce produced to higher welfare standards. Of course, consumers' willingness-to-pay a premium for better welfare can only be genuinely tested when they are faced with a choice on the supermarket shelf and it remains to be seen whether those who answered in the affirmative will

actually choose welfare-friendly products, but this apparent desire for high-welfare food is certainly encouraging.

Outside the area of farmed livestock, there is also a clear concern amongst citizens for the welfare of companion animals, with a majority wishing to see better Europe-wide legal protection for companion animals. This chimes with recent calls for harmonised European legislation to protect dog and cat welfare which, at present, is protected to a greater or lesser degree at national level.

Another finding is the desire of the citizens of many countries to better understand the welfare of both companion and farmed animals. Sixty-four percent wanted to have more information about the way animals are treated.

When the data are broken down to attitudes in different countries, clear national differences become apparent, for instance when asked if they wished to know more about the welfare of farmed animals in their country, over 80% of respondents from Cyprus and Romania answered 'yes' whereas less than half of respondents from the UK, Estonia, Hungary and the Netherlands wanted to know more. However, the interpretation of such differences is not always simple; is a lower demand for better knowledge about the welfare of farmed animals due to a lack of concern for the animals' welfare or the belief that they already understand the animals' welfare? Or perhaps even a belief that the welfare of animals in a particular country is so well protected that additional information is not needed?

This snapshot of European public opinion is a valuable resource for all those with an interest in animal welfare, identifying opportunities to improve welfare where the public is willing to accept change, even if costs are involved and also highlighting areas where the public may need to be better informed before progress can be made. The thirst for increased knowledge and clear standards suggests that there is much that can be done in the area of farmed livestock to improve welfare via the choices of European consumers. It is also useful to see the changes in attitude which have occurred since the last report.

**European Commission Public Opinion** (March 2016). Report and summaries (in various languages) are available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/SPECIAL/surveyKy/2096>.

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