

E U R O P E A N E C O N O M I C A R E A

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ON

THE USE OF FISHMEAL

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A. Background

In 2001, the European Council and the European Commission imposed a ban on feeding fishmeal to ruminants¹ as a precautionary measure against the spread of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs). This legislation, replaced by Commission Regulation 1234/2003, only allowed the feeding of fishmeal to non-ruminant animals (pigs, poultry) under certain conditions.

In 2003 the Commission recognised a new method to distinguish between fishmeal and mammalian meat and bone meal² and subsequently proposed a lifting of the ban on feeding fishmeal to ruminants. The European Parliament rejected the proposed regulation on ethical grounds, claiming that fish products are not part of the natural diet of herbivore ruminants.³

On 25 May 2005 the Committee on Fisheries of the European Parliament adopted a report on “*Industrial fisheries and the production of fishmeal and fish oil*”⁴ with 14 against 1 votes, which includes a motion for a resolution calling for the lifting of the ban on feeding of fishmeal and fish oil to ruminants.

B. The EP Report on Industrial fisheries and the production of fishmeal and fish oil

The report adopted by the Committee on Fisheries touches both upon the ethical and health issues related to the use of fishmeal and fish oil in animal feed, as well as the context of their sustainable production through industrial fisheries.

1.) Ethical questions related to the use of fishmeal in animal feeding

Regarding the ethical questions linked to the use of animal feed, the report comes to the conclusion that in a strictly nutritional context fishmeal is a valuable ingredient to the ruminant diet, as on scientific grounds it fulfils the necessary criteria of a good diet.

The argument that fishmeal may not be a “natural” element of ruminants’ diets is confronted with modern farming practises and the husbandry of domestic animals. As modern dairy cows cannot subsist on grass alone to sustain their level of production, they require additional nutritional supplements. The same is true for calves which are today removed from the mother very early, and which need a diet with a nutritional value close to that of cow’s milk.

Fishmeal is seen as a solution to the nutritional problems brought about by these farming methods. It provides health and welfare benefits to the animals through its amino acids and polyunsaturated omega-3 fatty acids. Its use in ruminant diets should therefore not be considered independently, but in relation to the methods of modern animal husbandry.

1 Council Decision 2000/766/EC and Commission Decision 2001/9/EC

2 Directive 2003/126/EC

3 Resolution P6_TA(2004)0043

4 Document A6-0155/2005 Final

The report particularly stresses the fact that fishmeal does not pose more risk to human or animal health than other feedstuffs, as there is no evidence linking fishmeal feeding to TSEs in farm animals, a view which is supported by the Commission and other health authorities.

2.) Use of fishmeal in aquaculture

The report also looks at the use of fishmeal in the production of edible fish through aquaculture, as this sector consumes an estimated 45% of fishmeal and 83% of fish oil production. Even with a large increase in aquaculture output, supply of fishmeal and fish oil has remained stable due to national/regional restrictions, thus ensuring sustainable fishing.

3.) Human health considerations

As almost all of the fishmeal and fish oil production is fed to animals, human health could be affected as a result of eating farmed animals brought up on such a diet. Oily fish may contain undesired substances such as dioxins or polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and its consumption should therefore be limited in certain cases.⁵

EC legislation regulates the maximum levels of undesired substances in animal feed in order to protect consumer health. The report acknowledges the initiative by Danish and British industries to install facilities for removing dioxin from fishmeal and fish oil, in response to concerns that in some fish those levels were close to these limits.

4.) Sustainability

Regarding the sustainability of Industrial fisheries, the report identifies several areas where action is deemed necessary:

- All species which are used to manufacture fishmeal and fish oil are managed through Total Allowable Catches (TACs), with the exception of Blue Whiting, which is harvested unsustainably according to the International Council for the Exploration of the SEA (ICES). The rapporteur therefore urges the EU, Norway and Iceland to agree on a global TAC for Blue Whiting.
- The report also mentions the problem of by-catch which is discarded and notes the plans by the Commission for further improvements in monitoring industrial fishing.⁶
- Finally, the problem of discards is addressed, as an estimated 1 million tons of dead fish are discarded into EU waters every year. The report insists on the necessity that all fish are landed, and on the implementation of penalties for anyone discarding fish, as they are in place in Iceland, Norway and the Faeroe Islands. The discards could be processed by the fishmeal and fish oil industry, which would increase their production in order to meet increasing demand.

C. Conclusion

The report indicates that with demand for fishmeal and fish oil on the rise, the limited supply of the latter is likely to lead to increased prices. Efforts to land discards would therefore help to meet the demand and could lead to an additional 70 million Euros of income in the EU fishing industry.

⁵ The report cites the UK Food Standards Agency FSA

⁶ Outlined in COM (2004) 167

Having regard to the fact that the Commission already in 2003 published an opinion confirming that fishmeal is not an intrinsic source of TSEs, and that a new method exists to distinguish fishmeal from other animal protein in ruminant feed⁷, the report claims that the ban on fishmeal is unjustified and causes significant harm to the industry. The legislation banning fishmeal and fish oil in ruminant feed should therefore be lifted as soon as possible.

D. Recent developments

In May 2006, the European Parliament agreed to allow the use of fishmeal in mills producing feed for several different species as well as allowing fishmeal to be fed to young ruminants. However, it was also agreed that the changes would not be permitted until a control and testing system is developed in order to ensure that only minute quantities of fishmeal would be fed to adult ruminants.

A Belgium laboratory has been appointed as the Community Reference Laboratory to develop the test and instigate a ring trial in the member states. The trials will soon be initiated.

Based on the results of the trials, where results are foreseen by the end of the year, a report will be produced by the first quarter of 2007. This report will identify what is the minimum fishmeal detection limit of the new technique and give a recommendation as to what should be the Tolerance Level of “contamination” by fishmeal in ruminant diets. Discussions will then be held with member states to agree and set the Tolerance Level, which will then be published and come into effect 20 days after publication. This is estimated to take place in the middle of next year. Until then the current ban will continue.

With regard to the used of fishmeal in young ruminants diets, this is considered to be more complicated and at a lower priority. The problem revolves around control measures and how to stop young ruminants diets being fed to adult ruminants. At farm level, this will become an almost impossible task and will therefore have to be done at mill level. One thought is that fishmeal could be restricted to milk-replacing diets which due to their cost are very unlikely to be used for adult ruminants and checks could be conducted at the mill level to confirm compliance.

It is estimated that serious work on this second aspect of the issue, will not start until next year and that it will be done in a step by step manner, which indicates that it might take some time.

Consequently, the Report of Committee on Fisheries of the European Parliament on “Industrial fisheries and the production of fishmeal and fish oil is at the moment at a standstill and will most likely not be presented to the European Parliament in plenary until the time is deemed right.

⁷ Directive 2003/126/EC