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Ban on seal products moves a step nearer

Trading in products derived from seals should be strictly banned throughout the EU, according to the European Parliament's Internal Market Committee. MEPs have voted to limit the exemptions to a ban proposed by the European Commission and ignored the view of their rapporteur, who proposed a form of labelling rather than an outright ban.

The ban should apply to the placing on the market and the import to, transit through, or export from, the European Community of seal products, says the report approved by the committee on Tuesday. It should also cover meat, oil, blubber, organs, and raw fur skins and fur skins, say MEPs. In practice, seal products such as bags, hats, boots and gloves used by motorcyclists, skiers and boxers would be outlawed, as would parapharmaceutical products sold as Omega 3 fatty acid supplements.

Exemptions for Inuit

MEPs voted against various exceptions to the general ban proposed by the Commission, for example where the seals are killed "without causing avoidable pain, distress and any other form of suffering". They also rejected the possibility of granting a national derogation at the request of a state. In both cases they argued that it would be impossible in practice to monitor compliance with the conditions under which a derogation would be granted.

However, the committee was in favour of a proposed derogation for the Inuit and other aboriginal communities. This would apply to products derived from traditional subsistence hunting that could be traded for cultural, educational, and/or ceremonial purposes, but subject to a number of conditions.

Labelling proposal rejected

The committee's final position was backed by 25 MEPs with no abstentions but the rapporteur Diana Wallis (ALDE, UK) and six other members voted against. Mrs Wallis proposed, instead of a ban, a labelling system which she believed would be more effective in assuring the customer that animal welfare norms had been obeyed. She doubted whether the ban, based on EU internal market rules, would be compatible with international trade rules. A legal opinion published recently by the Council supports this view.

However, most members shared the view of Danish Socialist MEP Christel Schaldemose, who argued "in this debate we are not dealing with a legal dilemma but a political one, to which Parliament must give a political response".

Responding to public opinion

The plan to outlaw on the Community market the sale, import, transit and export of seal products is intended as a response to the European Parliament's concerns about practices that cause unjustified suffering to animals. A declaration on the subject signed by 425 MEPs

Press release

in 2006 also stressed the need to take measures that would not have an impact on traditional Inuit seal hunting (3% of the world total). Parliament's position was prompted by concerns raised by NGOs and public opinion in most Member States about the treatment inflicted on seals.

Internal Market Committee chair Arlene McCarthy (PES, UK) said: "A clear majority of citizens across the European Union are horrified by the cruel clubbing to death of thousands of seals every year. They do not want these products on sale in the EU and today the Internal Market Committee has backed citizens' demands for a ban."

"The committee demonstrated with its law banning cat and dog fur that we do not just listen to citizens' concerns but we act. With this vote for a ban on seal products we have shown again that people power can win through and change the law," she added.

Harmonising trade rules in the EU

The regulation also seeks to end the current fragmentation of the EU internal market by laying down common harmonized rules that are directly applicable throughout the EU. At present national law varies, with some countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands having already banned trade in seal products and others envisaging doing so.

Next steps

The European Parliament, which is deciding on this issue jointly with the Council of Ministers, will vote on this report at a plenary session, probably on 1 April in Brussels. Once the regulation is adopted by Parliament and Council it is due to enter into force twenty days after its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union. The ban is laid down in Article 3, which would apply six months after the date of entry into force.

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