



28th January 2026

Olivér Várhelyi
 Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare
 European Commission

Please reply to:
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Dear Commissioner Várhelyi

Action by Commission needed to prevent further unlawful transport of unweaned calves from Ireland to France

We write further to your meeting on 24 September 2025 with Ethical Farming Ireland and Compassion in World Farming. That meeting took place following a letter to you dated 8 September 2025, signed by 26 pan-European animal welfare organisations, urging you to take effective steps to halt the unlawful transport of unweaned calves from Ireland to France by roll-on roll-off (RORO) ferry.

At that meeting you indicated that you were taking steps to require Ireland to halt this trade, as in the Commission's view it is being carried out in breach of EU law as the calves are not fed during the lengthy sea crossing from Ireland to France. Since our meeting we have heard nothing further from you. The matter is now highly urgent as Ireland's calf exports will resume in large numbers from mid-February. We urge you to move swiftly to ensure that Ireland respects Council Regulation (EC) 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations.

In the audit report dated 22 December 2023 (DG(SANTE) 2022-7503), the Commission stressed that, in its view, the transport of unweaned calves from Ireland to France is being carried out in breach of Regulation 1/2005. According to the Commission, the Regulation requires that unweaned calves be fed during the long sea crossing by RORO ferry from Ireland

to France. As this feeding does not take place, the Commission considers that said Regulation is not complied with.

The trade causes undue suffering and prolonged hunger

In addition to constituting a breach of the feeding requirements set out in Chapter V of Annex I to said Regulation, the trade also breaches the core provision of Article 3 that states ‘No person shall transport animals or cause animals to be transported in a way likely to cause injury or undue suffering to them’.

A Commission overview report (DG(SANTE) 2023-7925) states that ‘including loading and unloading, the calves may go without feeding for up to 24 hours.’ In some cases, the period without feeding may be even longer than this. This is corroborated by van Dijk et al. (2023), who report that calves sent from Ireland to France by RORO ferry ‘can experience repeated feed withdrawals of longer than 24 h’.¹

Van Dijk et al. (2025) describe the detrimental impact of long-distance transport without feed on unweaned calves.² They state that ‘long-distance transport can impact the biological functioning of unweaned dairy calves, including a negative energy balance, and increased dehydration and muscle fatigue. Prolonged feed withdrawals result in hypoglycaemia (low glucose concentrations), elevated beta-hydroxybutyrate (a ketone body produced during fat metabolism), and increased non-esterified fatty acids (released from fat stores), indicating a state of negative energy balance and metabolic stress. Long-distance transport can cause muscle fatigue/damage, largely because calves are straining against the movement of the trailer.’

Siegmann et al. (2025)³ point out that during long-distance transport ‘feed is often withheld for prolonged periods (>12 h), which has been shown to result in lowered glucose levels and a negative energy balance, causing calves to experience hunger and stress. Extended fasting also contributes to weight loss and dehydration. The additional energy needed for thermoregulation and maintaining balance in a moving vehicle aggravates energy loss during transport. In commercial practice, calves often do not receive appropriate feed at farms of origin or auction markets or assembly centers, due to mismatched feeding and pick-up schedules, thereby extending fasting periods past actual transport time.’

Large numbers of calves continue to suffer as a result of the Commission’s failure to ensure compliance by Ireland with EU law

Bord Bia, the Irish Food Board, reports that 199,614 calves were exported in 2024, and 225,000 calves were exported in 2025.⁴ This means that in excess of 424,000 calves will have been exported from Ireland to France since the Commission’s 2023 audit report declared that the failure to provide feed during the RORO ferry journeys to France is in breach of EU law.

Ireland’s failure to take effective steps to ensure unweaned calves are fed during RORO ferry crossings

In its January 2024 action plan following the audit report, Ireland said that it ‘will continue [its] research project into ways to safely feed calves milk replacer on board trucks during the ferry voyage from Ireland to continental Europe’. However, only one trial attempting to feed calves on board a RORO ferry appears to have been carried out and that was in October 2023, prior to Ireland issuing its action plan.

¹ <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/veterinary-science/articles/10.3389/fvets.2023.1238734/full>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1751731125001442>

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022030225003777>

⁴ <https://www.bordbia.ie/globalassets/bordbia.ie/performance--prospects/bord-bia-export-performance-and-prospects-report-2025---2026.pdf>

The results of that trial were published in May 2025.⁵ The trial bore little relation to commercial journeys under which around 300 calves are transported on three decks of a vehicle. In the trial only 38 calves were fed and all were placed in the bottom deck as this 'was the only location deemed reasonably safe for personnel access during the ferry crossing'. The paper states that 'the practical use of the on-board feeding system was difficult, perhaps even impossible in its current form within the context of transport by sea and the variability of real-life sea conditions.'

Teagasc, Ireland's Agriculture and Food Development Authority, has published a tender for the design and supply of an on-truck calf feeding system, with an expected completion timeframe of two years.⁶ However, the closing date for the tender was 12th August 2025 and there has been no notice published by Teagasc awarding it to anyone. Furthermore, waiting a further two years to determine whether a viable on-truck feeding system can be developed cannot be regarded as reasonable. During these two years, a further 400,000 or more unweaned calves may be transported from Ireland to France.

The Commission must act urgently to end ongoing transport of calves in breach of EU law

Article 13 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union requires the Union and the Member States, in formulating and implementing the Union's agriculture policies, 'to pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals'. Failing to act when over 400,000 calves have been transported in breach of Regulation (EC) 1/2005 since the Commission's finding that calves must be fed during the RORO crossing from Ireland is inconsistent with Article 13.

The Commission must now take effective measures to halt the transport of unweaned calves from Ireland to France by RORO ferry, by commencing infringement proceedings.

Yours sincerely

Animal Advocacy & Food Transition: Olga Kikou Director
Anima International: Kirsty Henderson President
Animal Justice Project: Claire Palmer MSc Zoology Director
Animal Law Italia: Alessandro Ricciuti CEO
Animalia: Heidi Kivekäs Executive Director
Animal Welfare Foundation: Iris Baumgärtner Project Manager
Aprad: Maxime Louis, President
Caring Vets: Nicole de Schwartz President
Compassion In World Farming: Peter Stevenson OBE Chief Policy Advisor
Deutscher Tierschutzbund e.V: Thomas Schröder President
Dier&Recht: Frederieke Schouten CEO and Veterinarian
Djurskyddet Sverige: (Animal Welfare Sweden) Åsa Hagelstedt Secretary General
Dyrevernalliansen: (Norwegian Animal Protection Alliance) Anton Krag CEO and Zoologist
Ethical Farming Ireland: Caroline Rowley Director
Eyes on Animals: Lesley Moffat, Director
Four Paws: Joe Moran Director FOUR PAWS Belgium
Hellenic Animal Welfare Federation: Irini Molfessi Chair of the Board
L214: Brigitte Githiere CEO
The Swedish Association for the Protection of Animals: Lillemor Wodmar President
Una Terra Foundation: Ervin Nagy President
Welfarm: Ghislain Zuccolo Directeur Général
World Animal Protection: Roger Pettersson CEO World Animal Protection Sweden

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392218513_Feeding_on_the_move_Assessing_the_effect_of_feeding_during_long-distance_ferry_transport_on_the_physiology_clinical_signs_of_disease_and_activity_of_unweaned_calves

⁶ <https://ted.europa.eu/en/notice/-/detail/456681-2025>