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SPECIAL REPORT

HANS KRIEK

CRUEL CODES

The Animal Welfare Act 1999 requires codes of welfare to be developed for all species of animals in the care of humans. Campaign director Hans Kriek gives his perspective on a process that promised so much, but delivers so little.

Four years ago the New Zealand animal welfare and rights movement cautiously welcomed the new Animal Welfare Act which replaced the antiquated 40-year-old Animal Protection Act. The new Act promised heavier penalties for animal abusers and placed a duty of care on those in charge of animals. Section 10 of the Act requires that animals be able to display normal patterns of behaviour. This was especially welcome, as it was believed this could bring an end to many intensive farming practices.

The National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (a committee appointed by the Minister of Agriculture to advise on animal welfare issues) (NAWAC) was given the task of reviewing existing voluntary codes with the aim of bringing them into line with the new Act. Six industries (pig, layer hen, broiler chicken, rodeo, circus and zoo) were believed to be in breach of the new Act and were given a special protective status period of three years to review their respective welfare codes.

Almost five years later and only the broiler (meat chicken) and rodeo codes are complete. Both are virtually carbon copies of the existing voluntary codes. No meaningful change was introduced at all. Broiler chickens still can be kept at 20 birds per metre and be fed antibiotic growth promotants. Rodeo animals still can be forced to buck, painfully roped, wrestled and generally abused.

NAWAC determined that sow stalls, farrowing crates and battery hen cages are in breach of the Animal Welfare Act as the animals cannot express their normal behaviour. Despite this, drafts of the pig and layer hen codes show that these systems will be allowed to be used for decades to come. Beak trimming and castration without anaesthetic is still permissible, as is the overcrowding of fattening pigs. The circus code allows for the continued use of exotic animals.

While the animal welfare community is outraged, NAWAC's failings were entirely predictable. NAWAC is dominated by representatives with vested interests in animal research and exploitation. NAWAC's calls for further research therefore come as no surprise, as this delaying tactic allows industries to continue their cruel practices and guarantees a few more lucrative research grants for scientists.

NAWAC appears to have abandoned common sense, ignored overseas developments, dismissed public opinion and failed to work within the spirit of the Animal Welfare Act. The code review process has squandered tens-of-thousands of taxpayers' dollars and has achieved nothing to benefit animals.

Accountable only to the Minister of Agriculture, NAWAC is safe in the knowledge that it will not be taken to task for its incompetence. The Minister of Agriculture's primary responsibility is to protect the interests of farmers and their right to use animals. NAWAC's inaction perfectly fits this agenda.

Despite its early misgivings, SAFE fully participated in the public consultation process by providing NAWAC with well-researched, comprehensive submissions. All of SAFE's main welfare concerns were ignored. SAFE will no longer take part in this farcical process and instead will focus its attention on consumers, as only consumers will now be able to effect change for animals where highly paid officials have so miserably failed.

What the new codes mean for animals in New Zealand

BROILER CHICKENS
- Overcrowded conditions
- Painful leg weakness
- Antibiotic growth promotants
- 20 chickens per square metre

BATTERY HENS
- Cramped, barren cages
- Less than A4 sheet of space
- Painful debeaking
- Feather loss and foot injuries

PIGS
- Severe confinement in sow stalls
- Sows unable to turn around
- Overcrowded fattening pens
- Mutilations without anaesthetic

RODEOS
- Cruel calf roping
- Steer wrestling injuries
- Flank strap-induced bucking

CIRCUSES
- Exotic animals caged
- Forced to perform silly tricks
- Inadequate exercise
- Solitary elephants

ZOOS
- Inadequate enclosures
- Unnatural group dynamics
- Abnormal behaviour
- Solitary confinement

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