

News story: Environment Secretary confirms sentience of animals will continue to be recognised and protections strengthened when we leave the EU

The sentience of animals will continue to be recognised and protections strengthened when we leave the EU, Environment Secretary Michael Gove confirmed today.

Mr Gove made a Written Ministerial Statement today. The full text is below.

Animal welfare – Michael Gove

This Government is committed to the very highest standards of animal welfare. As the Prime Minister has set out, we will make the United Kingdom a world leader in the care and protection of animals.

It has been suggested that the vote last week on New Clause 30 of the EU Withdrawal Bill somehow signalled a weakening in the protection of animals – that is wrong. Voting against the amendment was not a vote against the idea that animals are sentient and feel pain – that is a misconception.

Ministers explained on the floor of the house that this Government's policies on animal welfare are driven by our recognition that animals are indeed sentient beings and we are acting energetically to reduce the risk of harm to animals – whether on farms or in the wild. The vote against New Clause 30 was the rejection of a faulty amendment, which would not have achieved its stated aims of providing appropriate protection for animals.

The Prime Minister has made clear that we will strengthen our animal welfare rules. This government will ensure that any necessary changes required to UK law are made in a rigorous and comprehensive way to ensure animal sentience is recognised after we leave the EU. The Withdrawal Bill is not the right place to address this, however we are considering the right legislative vehicle.

We are already proposing primary legislation to increase maximum sentences for animal cruelty from six months to five years, and the creation of a new statutory, independent body to uphold environmental standards.

The current EU instrument – Article 13 – has not delivered the progress we want to see. It does not have direct effect in law – in practice its effect is very unclear and it has failed to prevent practices across the EU which are cruel and painful to animals.

In contrast, here in the UK, we are improving animal welfare standards

without EU input and beyond the scope of Article 13. We are making CCTV mandatory in all slaughterhouses – a requirement which goes above and beyond any EU rule. We will consult on draft legislation to jail animal abusers for up to five years – more than almost every other European nation. We propose combatting elephant poaching with a ban on the ivory trade which is more comprehensive than anywhere else in Europe. Our ban on microbeads which harm marine animals has been welcomed by Greenpeace as “the strongest in the world”, and is certainly the strongest in Europe.

Once we have left the EU there is even more we could do. EU rules prevent us from restricting or banning the live export of animals for slaughter. EU rules also restrict us from cracking down on puppy smuggling or banning the import of puppies under 6 months. Article 13 has not stopped any of these practices – but leaving the EU gives us the chance to do much better. We hope to say more in these areas next year.

This government will continue to promote and enhance animal welfare, both now and after we have left the EU.