

Government considering labelling of non-stunned meat

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The Government is considering introducing labelling requirements to ensure consumers know whether halal or kosher meat has been stunned before slaughter, the National Secular Society can reveal.

In a [reply](#) to NSS campaigns director Stephen Evans, Lord Gardiner of Kimble, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, wrote: "This is an issue the Government is considering in the context of the UK's exit from the EU."

"The Government is aware that there is public concern about meat from animals slaughtered in accordance with religious beliefs being sold to consumers who do not require their meat to be prepared in this way," Lord Gardiner wrote.

"There are no domestic or European regulations that require the labelling of halal or kosher meat but where any information of this nature is provided, it must be accurate and must not be misleading to the consumer. The Government believes that consumers should have the necessary information available to them to make an informed choice about their food."

The response came after the NSS [wrote](#) to Michael Gove, the Environment Secretary, last month. The Society highlighted data from the Food Standards Agency, which showed a [sharp rise](#) in the number of animals killed without stunning over the last four years.

Mr Evans asked what consideration the Government had given to the idea of labelling either stunned or non-stunned meat, a measure which "would at least allow consumers to make an informed choice".

A [previous attempt](#) in 2010 to introduce labelling of non-stunned meat as part of EU food labelling legislation was dropped by European ministers following intense lobbying from Muslim and Jewish groups.

The NSS campaigns for an end to religious exemptions to animal welfare laws, as Mr Evans stressed in the letter. "Whilst we support the right to religious freedom, we recognise that this is not an absolute right, and do not support religious exemptions from animal welfare regulations intended to ensure that farm animals are slaughtered under the most humane conditions possible," he wrote.

While the exemptions exist the NSS has called for clear labelling to meat which is non-stunned.

Lord Gardiner did not indicate a willingness to end the religious exemption to animal welfare laws. "The Government encourages the highest standards of welfare at slaughter and would prefer to see all animals stunned before they are slaughtered for food," he wrote. "However, we also respect the rights of the Jewish and Muslim communities to eat meat prepared in accordance with their religious beliefs."

The latest move comes amid concern that hardline interpretations of religious 'law' are being used to justify an increase in animal suffering. Last year the Halal Food Authority, an accreditation body for halal meat which has previously shown a preference for non-stunned meat, [introduced](#) a 'stun free' certification to show which of its meat was 'traditional halal'. Its main rival, the Halal Monitoring Committee, only acknowledges meat as halal if it is not stunned before slaughter.

The Government recently announced that mandatory CCTV is to be introduced in all slaughterhouses, with vets being given unrestricted access to the footage. Abattoirs found to be failing welfare standards could face a criminal investigation, the suspension or revocation of staff licenses, or enforcement letters.

Mr Gove said the new plans for mandatory cameras, which are to be phased in this year, would ensure Britain is a "global leader" in animal welfare standards as the country leaves the EU.

And in July the Food Standards Agency announced it will publish quarterly data on the number of abattoirs using non-stun slaughter as well as how many animals are slaughtered without stunning.

The issue has also caused significant local controversies. Last month Lancashire County Council [voted](#) to stop supplying non-stunned halal meat to schools, a move the NSS lobbied for. Last week the NSS [wrote](#) to Bradford's district council to urge it to follow suit.

Responding to the latest news, Mr Evans said: "The fact that the Government is considering the introduction of method of slaughter labelling is a small but important step. Labelling would at least give consumers who do not wish to eat non-stunned halal or kosher meat the opportunity to avoid it.

"But it is still disappointing that the Government appears unwilling to tackle the religious exemption to the animal welfare laws. We will continue to press for the end of this, in order to protect both animal welfare and the principle of one law for all."

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