

NSS challenges government backtracking on non-stun meat labelling

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The National Secular Society has urged the government to rethink its position on non-stun slaughter after a minister appeared to backtrack on requiring meat from unstunned animals to be labelled.

The NSS has written to Theresa Villiers, the environment secretary, after she said the government opposes restrictions on non-stun slaughter, including labelling requirements.

In an interview with [Jewish News](#), published this week, she said the government supports "the right of faith communities to eat according to their own religious beliefs".

She added that she "wouldn't accept labelling changes which could put up the costs of food for the [Jewish] community".

She said she "would not have supported" amendments to an Agriculture Bill, proposed earlier this year in parliament's last session. One of the amendments would have [required](#) the labelling of non-stun meat.

And she said the government had "more to do to provide reassurance" to 'faith communities', adding: "I believe, as the new secretary of state, that it is very important for people to be able to follow their faith."

A religious exemption to UK animal welfare legislation currently allows meat to be slaughtered without stunning if it is intended for consumption by Jews or Muslims.

In previous comments since 2017 ministers at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) have suggested the government would review labelling requirements.

In its letter the NSS urged the government to end the religious exemption which allows non-stun slaughter, or short of that to introduce labelling requirements and prohibit the export of non-stun meat.

It added that Villiers's statement on labelling "seems to accept that the economic viability of the kosher industry is dependent on non-stun meat being allowed to slip into the general food chain". It noted: "This means non-stun meat is routinely being sold on the general market to unwitting members of the public."

The NSS asked what progress, if any, had been made on reviewing the government's position on labelling requirements.

And the society highlighted [figures](#) from the Food Standards Agency which highlighted the extent of non-stun slaughter in England and Wales.

The figures showed that over 94m cattle, sheep and poultry were subject to non-stun slaughter in 2018, and almost a quarter of sheep meat from non-stun slaughter was exported.

Explaining the NSS's letter, chief executive Stephen Evans said: "It's concerning to see a secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs prioritising religious interests over improving animal welfare and providing consumers with accurate information about their products they're buying.

"Theresa Villiers's stated position would mean farm animals continue to endure unnecessary suffering and the principle of one law for all is undermined, diluting efforts to uphold citizens' rights consistently. We're urging the government to reconsider its stance."

Ministers' previous positions

- In a letter to the NSS in March Defra minister David Rutley said the government was "considering labelling in the context of the UK leaving the EU". That echoed a [similar line](#) in a letter from John Gardiner to the NSS in 2017.
- In a Lords debate in December 2018 government peer Charlotte Vere also [said](#) the government was "committed" to reviewing food labelling "once our future partnership with the EU is clear".

The animal welfare case against non-stun

- Bodies including the Farm Animal Welfare Council (which advises the government) and an EU scientific panel have [said](#) slaughter without pre-stunning causes animals excessive distress.
- Animal welfare groups including the British Veterinary Association, [Compassion in World Farming](#) and the RSPCA support an end to non-stun slaughter.

Further notes

- The NSS's letter noted that [Article 9](#) of the European Convention on Human Rights, which defends the freedom to practice religion, is "a qualified right that can be restricted on reasonable grounds". The NSS said the defence of animal welfare "provides a sufficient justification for ending non-stun slaughter".
- In her remarks Villiers also said a minister in her department who recently called for a free vote on non-stun slaughter would be expected to adhere to "collective responsibility". George Eustice, who is now a junior minister at Defra, [made the call](#) as a Conservative backbencher in July.
- Last year NSS research [found](#) that meat from animals which have not been stunned before slaughter is widespread in UK supermarkets.
- Theresa Villiers is a [patron](#) of the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation.

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