



Veal production

RSPCA Farm Animals Department information sheet

June 2008

What is veal?

Veal is meat from calves, usually the unwanted offspring of dairy herds, slaughtered when they are about six months old. In most cases at one to two weeks of age the calves are taken from the farms where they were born to specialist rearing units, where they are kept until slaughtered at five to six months of age.

How are calves reared?

This varies according to the system used.

Crates

Veal crates (narrow, individual pens, with slatted or concrete floor and no bedding) were banned throughout the EU at the end of 2006, something for which the RSPCA had campaigned for many years. Following the Scientific Veterinary Committee's report (1995) on the welfare of calves in various systems, the European Commission issued proposals calling for increased space allowance, improvements in diet and a ban on tethering. The European Parliament also voted in favour of the ban of crates and, finally, the European Council of Agriculture Ministers agreed to implement the improved space allowances from the end of 2006, so effectively introducing a ban on the veal crate throughout Europe. Calves can now only be kept individually if under eight weeks of age, and only if they have enough space in which to turn round and can see, hear and touch other calves.

Group Housing Systems

The standards of welfare in these systems can vary considerably. In many of the group housing systems used on the Continent, although animals experience social contact and greater freedom of movement than in crates, they are kept on totally slatted floors with no comfortable resting area. The EU law also allows the calves to be fed on a liquid milk diet and the roughage provided may not be of an appropriate type or sufficient quantity to allow normal development of the digestive system. This feeding regime helps to ensure the production of the 'desired' pale flesh, since the law allows haemoglobin levels in calves' blood to fall below those that safeguard against anaemia.

In the UK, regulations came into force in 1990 which resulted in an important step forward for calf welfare. All calves must have sufficient room to be able to turn round without difficulty, must have a daily diet containing sufficient iron to maintain them in full health and vigour, and all calves more than 14 days old must have access each day to sufficient fibre to allow their digestive system to develop normally. Bedding must also be provided. The result of this is that veal production in the UK has for a number of years been based on group housing, straw based systems, which provide calves with better standards of welfare than required by EU law. When properly run and managed, veal calf rearing systems in the UK provide the animals with a good quality of life. Due to the diet and lifestyle of the calves, the meat produced under this system is pink rather than almost white in colour.

Where does veal on sale in the UK come from?

Compared with other European countries, very little veal is eaten in the UK, but only a small proportion of that consumed is produced under welfare-friendly systems in Britain. Some supermarkets sell only British veal, but many hotels, restaurants and other caterers sell veal imported from the Continent. Thus we may be importing and eating meat produced under systems illegal in this country.

In May 2006, the ban on exports of cattle (including calves) from the UK – introduced due to concerns about high levels of BSE in this country – was lifted. This led to a resumption in exports of young calves, mainly the unwanted males produced on dairy farms, to veal rearing systems on the Continent. This trade raises a number of welfare concerns relating both to the effect of the transportation process on those animals, and to the nature of the conditions in which they may be reared (as described above).

What is the RSPCA doing to improve dairy calf welfare?

The RSPCA is urging the dairy industry and the Government to explore other options and possible financial support for rearing dairy-bred calves under higher welfare conditions in the UK.

In 2006 the RSPCA and CIWF set up a forum on veal calf exports. The forum, which brings together representatives from a broad range of relevant sectors including the dairy, beef, food processing and food retail industries, Defra and the welfare research community, aims to seek a constructive, mutually-beneficial way forward to replace the calf export trade with marketing opportunities in the UK.

Three sub-groups have subsequently been set up, looking at the key issues of marketing, genetics and general calf welfare. Encouragingly, all sectors of the industry have been prepared to debate the issues in a positive way, in order to develop practical solutions. A number of initiatives are now underway, which aim to address the key issues that currently hamper progress in this area.

How can you help?

- ➔ Humanely reared British veal is now being marketed under the Freedom Food label, the RSPCA's farm animal welfare food labelling scheme. The calves are inspected to detailed higher welfare standards, laid down and monitored by the RSPCA. They live in small groups, with deep straw bedding, access to fibre, and a diet that keeps them in full health and vigour.
- ➔ If you eat veal, make sure it is from animals reared under welfare-friendly, loose-housed systems. Also, if you see veal on a restaurant menu, even if you are not thinking of ordering it, ask the Manager where it comes from. If it is not from this country, tell him or her that the chances are that it could have been produced under systems that would be unacceptable in the UK and ask the restaurant to use only humanely reared veal.