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Political Opportunities for Farm Animals in Europe

Could this year be the tipping point for farm animals in Europe? It's already brought more legislative progress for Europe's farm animals than the last decade combined:

In January, the agricultural ministers of the two largest European nations, France and Germany, jointly [pledged](#) to ban the killing of day-old chicks by the end of next year. The French minister also pledged to ban the castration of piglets without pain relief, as Germany is already set to do. If implemented, the measures could spare 90 million day-old chicks from gassing, and 30 million piglets from castration, across the two nations every year.

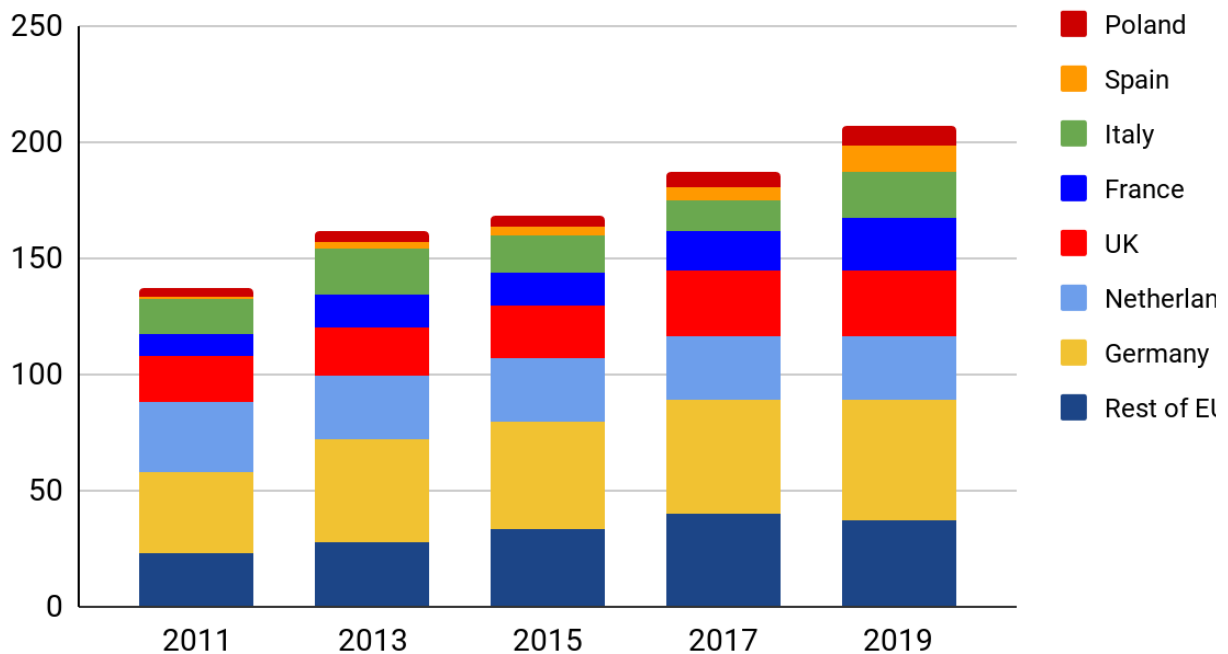
In May, the European Commission [announced](#) plans to revisit and revise its animal welfare directives for chickens, calves, pigs, and animals in transport and slaughter, by the end of 2023. This follows two decades of the Commission pursuing few new protections for farm animals, and could affect the welfare of over two billion animals/year.

In July, the German Federal Council [approved](#) an eight year phase-out of sow stalls and a 15 year phase-out of most farrowing crates, along with \$300 million to subsidize the transition. The move will spare about 1.5 million sows/year from extreme confinement, and is already building pressure on other European countries to follow suit.

This month, the Czech Parliament [voted](#) to ban cages for the country's five million caged hens; the Polish Parliament [passed](#) an overhaul of the nation's animal protection law, including a ban on most fur farming; and the UK's House of Lords [voted](#) to require food imported under future trade deals to meet UK animal welfare laws. If agreed to by the Czech and Polish Senates, and the UK House of Commons, these moves could establish critical precedents for the rest of Europe.

So what's going on, and how can advocates take advantage of this window of opportunity to push political change in Europe?

Cage-Free Hens in Europe (Millions)



The EU has 70M more cage-free hens today than it did in 2011. Total includes all hens in free-range, organic, and barn (cage-free indoor) systems. 2019 UK data is conservatively kept constant from 2017, as the EU no longer reports UK data post-Brexit (and the UK doesn't report comparable data). Sources: EU data compiled from various sources for [2011](#); [2013](#); [2015](#); [2017](#); [2019](#).

Causes for Progress in Europe

Three main factors seem to be driving the recent progress. First, effective advocacy by European advocates. Last year, a coalition of 170 animal protection groups led by Compassion in World Farming gathered 1.6 million signatures from European citizens calling for an EU-wide cage ban. This [measure](#), which was the first successful animal welfare-focused European citizens initiative, has already been referenced by the European Commission as evidence of popular support for more legislation.

Advocates have also built pressure in EU member states. In addition to the German and Czech crate and cage bans, advocates secured a pledge in February from the Slovak agricultural minister and industry leaders to phase out cages by 2030. And in July, a coalition of French NGOs, celebrities, and tech entrepreneurs launched a [Référéndum Pour Les Animaux](#), including a ban on the worst factory farming practices. While the referendum may not secure the support of the 185 French parliamentarians it needs by next Wednesday (it currently has 142), it has built unprecedented political pressure for reform in France.

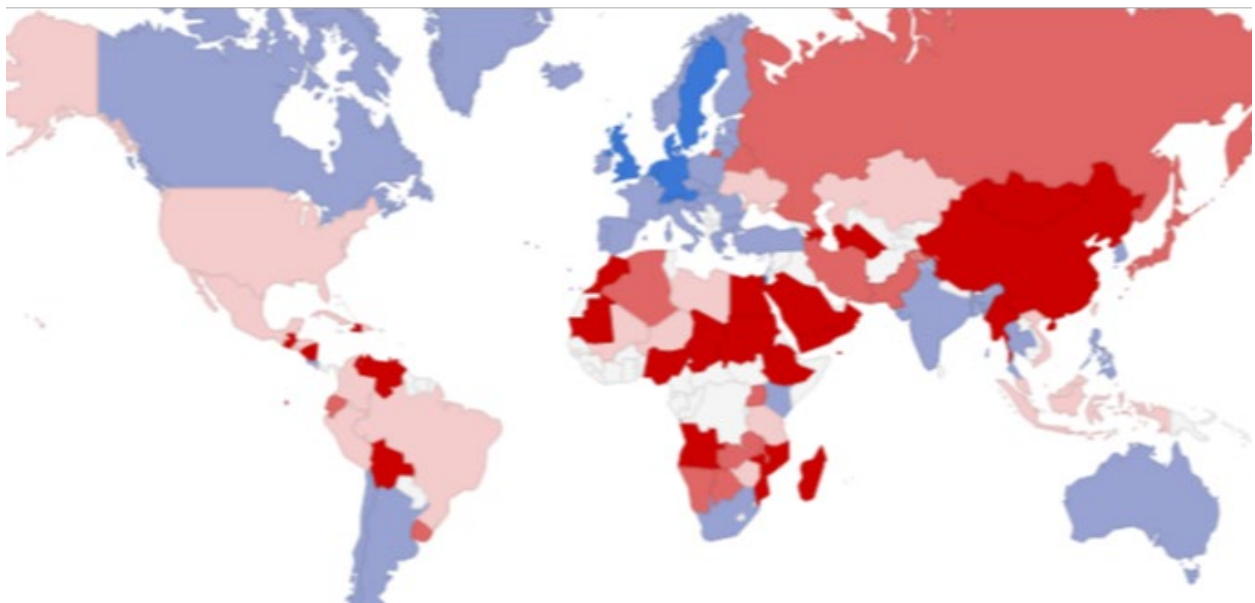
Second, corporate progress. European nations and the EU are responding to the new reality that most major European retailers have either stopped selling caged eggs or pledged to do so by 2025. That's the result of dogged corporate campaigning by advocates — since 2017 alone, they've won [over 700](#) new

cage-free pledges across Europe. In 2019, for the first time, a [majority](#) of the Europe's layer hens were in cage-free systems.

Corporate campaigns are now building pressure for progress on broiler chicken welfare. Since the end of last year, five of France's seven biggest supermarket chains have pledged to meet the higher-welfare European Chicken Commitment for at least their own brand chicken. Advocates are now pushing for similar commitments from British, German, and Danish retailers, which will hopefully create pressure on the EU to issue a stronger broiler welfare directive.

Third, Brexit. Some worried Brexit would hurt farm animals by removing one of the EU's most vocal champions for animal welfare. But so far it seems to have mainly liberated the EU to pursue a more progressive agenda, as in the new EU Green Deal [Farm to Fork Strategy](#), which includes the Commission's revision of animal welfare laws. Indeed, since the UK formally left the EU earlier this year, the European Parliament [voted](#) to investigate the treatment of animals in transport and European agriculture ministers [backed](#) a new EU animal welfare label.

Brexit could also still be good for British farm animals. Prime Minister Boris Johnson [told](#) Parliament last October that Brexit would enable the UK to ban farrowing crates and the live export trade, and [reports](#) suggest his government is working on both measures. In a Parliament debate this March, the government even [said](#) that it is "currently examining the future use of cages for all laying hens."



A map of national farm animal welfare legislation, from weakest (dark red) to strongest (dark blue). Dark red = no legislation; light red = limited regulation of just transport and/or slaughter; light blue = limited regulation of on-farm welfare, dark blue = more regulation of on-farm welfare. Sources: World Animal Protection [Animal Protection Index](#), FAO country [reports](#) (and linked national legislation), [Bracke](#) (2009), and OIE reports for [Americas](#) (2006) and [Africa](#) (2011).

Where to Focus

There are a lot of exciting political opportunities in Europe, but three stand out. The first is to secure revised EU directives for the bloc's roughly 1.5 billion broiler chickens and layer hens. The European Commission has requested a scientific opinion on the topic, traditionally a precursor to regulation, by the end of 2022. That coincides nicely with pro-welfare Sweden assuming the rotating presidency of the European Council, a position from which nations can influence new EU regulation. The next two years thus present a unique opportunity to line up support for an EU-wide ban on cages and the worst abuses of broilers.

The second is to secure EU fish welfare protections. This will likely take longer, but in June, advocates secured the first fish welfare [guidelines](#) from the EU Platform on Animal Welfare. Although these lack legal force, the European Commission treats the Platform as an official advisory body, and is especially likely to consider these guidelines given they have the support of the largest EU fish farming nations (Greece, Spain, and Italy).

The third is for the EU and UK to insert their animal welfare standards into new trade deals. As the map above shows, much of the world still lags behind Europe on farm animal welfare laws, and low-welfare imports risk undermining Europe's standards. That's why the UK House of Lords' vote this week is so exciting — it sets a precedent for requiring imports to meet domestic animal welfare standards, which no European nation yet does. Advocates now have an opportunity to push the UK House of Commons to agree to the Lords' amendment, and to push the EU to insert animal welfare provisions in future trade deals.

Compassion in World Farming and Eurogroup for Animals are leading efforts on all three priorities, with the support of groups across Europe. Email me if you'd like to support, or learn more about, this work. In future newsletters, I'll be sharing more on legislative opportunities in the US, Asia, and the rest of the world.