

Press Release

Animal welfare NGOs expose bull's mistreatment: transport company fined

Freiburg, March 2023. In 2020, the young bull Ferdinand was supposed to be loaded onto a substandard livestock vessel at the port of Cartagena, Spain. However, he was unfit for travel, unable to move and heavily mistreated. Workers subjected him to prolonged electric shocks and kicking. Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) filed a complaint against the transport company and veterinarian authorities, based on evidence collected together with Animals International and Welfarm. The investigation that followed the complaint revealed further violations. The export company in charge is one of the largest in Spain and has now been fined 4,500 Euros.

AWF filed an administrative complaint in 2020, and the case was classified as two serious administrative offences with major infringements of the transport regulation. The infringements were secondary and rather formal findings and are not directly related to animal abuse. They include lacking coordination between the different stages of the transport and a lack of communication which made it impossible to properly inspect all the animals.

In July 2020, Animal Welfare Foundation, Animals International and Welfarm witnessed and filmed how young bulls from different European countries were loaded from trucks onto a livestock vessel that exported them from Cartagena to Benghazi, Libya. One of them, a French bull who was named Ferdinand by the investigators, was injured and too weak to walk. At this point, he should have been euthanised on the spot. However, although clearly unfit for travel, workers forced him out of the truck by dragging him with a rope. Later, he was forced inside again because he was unable to walk through the vessel ramp.

After the distressful procedure, the driver left the port and parked the truck at a petrol station nearby, with Ferdinand inside in the blazing sun, to take a prolonged lunch break. At this point, the NGOs called the police, who were not able to identify violations immediately and had to let the driver proceed.

Animal welfare NGOs call for ban of live exports and stronger penalties for violators

Ferdinand's case is only one out of many and highlights the systematic failure of animal welfare during transport. The organiser did not coordinate the arrival of the trucks properly and veterinarians had no chance to control the process correctly. The importance of animal welfare in livestock transport was recently again underscored in an audit report on Spain's livestock transport industry.

The audit found that many sea transporters follow generic contingency plans that are unlikely to protect the welfare of animals during emergencies. Additionally, there is an insufficient number of official staff during loading, and delays in loading can create risks for the welfare of the animals, as they lack proper facilities to rest, feed, and water animals. New legislation will not be able to solve the defective nature of live transports.

"The suffering of the bull was obvious, but not even mentioned in the administrative verdict file. The procedure was carried out with clear opacity and lack of coordination by the competent body. We do not know whether the investigative measures we requested were carried out", says **Maria Boada-Saña, Project Manager at Animal Welfare Foundation**. "I hope that the ruling in the Ferdinand case will encourage stronger penalties for those who violate the regulations. We have been making this point for years. There is a notable lack of controls by veterinarian authorities, and examining one violation will often lead to other findings."

Gabriel Paun, EU Director at Animals International, adds that “Ferdinand’s injuries were so severe that he was unable to walk, and yet he was still subjected to prolonged electric shocks and kicking. He was then pulled by a tractor on a rope to get him back into the truck. After that, he melted in pain and heat at a petrol station in bright sun while the driver enjoyed his lunch. This is not just a violation of regulations; it is a moral and ethical issue that needs to be addressed.”

Adrienne Bonnet, Head of Campaign, Advocacy and Legal Department at Welfarm, states: “It is sad to see a French animal end up in such a situation. The member states of the European Union need to address animal welfare issues in a joint effort. From the approval of transport vehicles to slaughter methods in third countries, such situations can only be prevented if live transports of long duration within and from the EU are stopped.”

Without the intervention of the three NGOs, the case would not have been exposed at all. This leaves transport companies with the impression of an acceptable risk: The sanctions for bad practices are not strong enough to act better in the future, even if they are considered major infringements.

NGOs call for a ban of live exports altogether. Many member states of the European Union use Spain as a loophole to send their animals from industries that would otherwise not be as profitable to third countries.

Contact:

Maria Boada-Saña
Project Manager Sea Transport
m.boada@awf-tsb.org
+41 79 330 93 42