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From the Secretary of State
The Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP

Dear Caroline Lucas,

Thank you for your letter of 9 June enclosing a petition from several constituents about live exports. I am sorry for the delay in replying.

This Government is committed to improving the welfare of animals and we would prefer a trade in meat instead of the long distance transport of live animals to slaughter. The proportion of live sheep exports when compared to exports in the form of sheep meat has fallen from nearly 15% in 1999 to under 3% in 2003.

As long as animals are exported live (as it is illegal to ban such exports because of free trade rules) we want to ensure the transportation is of high quality and finite journey length.

We were disappointed by the recent failure of EU Ministers to reach an agreement on new rules governing animal transport. The UK Government, after consulting with both the industry and welfare groups, had pressed hard during negotiations for shorter journey times, more space for animals and better ventilation during transport. Unfortunately, in these very important areas, there was a blocking minority of countries who were opposed to these improvements. In our view, the "compromise" proposals that were then tabled by the EU Presidency did not go nearly far enough to improve animal welfare. In some areas they were worse than the status quo and therefore we could not support them.

As a decision was not reached, the current rules on journey times, conditions of transport and provision of feed and water continue to apply. We will continue to ensure that animals that leave the UK are transported in full accordance with the law. Our priority now is to work with the European Commission to ensure that the existing rules are implemented

properly in all Member States. That should lead to a significant improvement in animal welfare, not least in the EU Member States who will have to observe these higher standards for the first time.

The UK Government is committed to continuing to work with other welfare-minded Governments in Europe for improvements in animal welfare.

Sincerely

Margaret Beckett

MARGARET BECKETT