

March 2009

Thank you for your letter regarding the Trade in seal products Regulation which is currently being discussed in the European Parliament.

The European Parliament is currently considering two alternatives for implementing this Regulation. The first is a total ban on the trade in products derived from seals, with a few limited exceptions for protected communities, such as Inuits. This is an attempt to stop the commercial trade of seals that were killed in third countries such as Canada or Namibia.

The second option - written by the "rapporteur" Diana Wallis MEP (British Liberal Democrat) - proposes a rigorous labelling and certification system for seal products instead of a trade ban. This is an attempt to ensure that strict animal welfare standards can be enforced without the need for a ban.

Before I go any further, I feel I should point out that neither of these proposals would ban the killing of seals. In practice, seals will continue to be hunted, killed and skinned in several countries regardless of whether this proposal is adopted or not, and regardless of whether we like it or not.

A trade ban sounds like a panacea, and is certainly an easier option to take, because it is simpler. It is also a strong statement of how the citizens of EU countries (and their politicians) feel about the culling of seals that takes place outside of our borders. This is the option that was passed in the Internal Market Committee of the European Parliament on Monday 2nd March.

However, MEPs have received independent legal analysis from both the European Council (attached) and the European Parliament which strongly suggests that a total ban may not be legally enforceable under European Union law, and may also face significant legal problems under the rules governing the World Trade Organisation. I am sure it goes without saying that a ban that is not enforceable is of course not a ban at all.

A vote of the whole Parliament will take place in the coming months and it looks likely that a total trade ban will be adopted. The issue will then move to the European Council for their amendment or approval later this year.

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