Welfare during gathering and loading of deer bred for meat in Italy

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to evaluate welfare status and the implementation of Regulation (EC) 1/2005 during the gathering and loading of deer (Cervus elaphus) bred for meat in Northern Italy. Four journeys overland along with related operations of 45 deer, destined for game farms, were observed over a period of four months. Planning, animal-management procedures, equipment and facilities, such as enclosures and corridors, influenced the success of the operations and affected the safety of animals and operators. Environmental factors, such as land inclination, were also extremely influential. Elements of the gathering technique led to stress and hyperventilation in a number of animals that were rounded up. Chemical restraint of deer was complicated by consequent physical manipulation and an inability to control withdrawal periods in game reserves. Where facilities were specific to deer, animals displayed no signs of distress and loading was carried out in the absence of stressful behaviour. Instances in which means of transport were non-specific for deer were characterised by falls, escape and trauma during loading and unloading. Where operators had been trained and had extensive knowledge of deer physiology and behaviour, welfare and the safety of professionals were promoted along with an overall regard for the relevant legislation. This study demonstrates a number of the challenges associated with deer transport and related activities. The paucity of specific legislation regarding the management and transport of farmed deer and the absence of European standard procedures have created a lack of harmonisation in transport procedures, ultimately jeopardising the welfare of deer.

Keywords: animal welfare, deer, legislation, loading, stress, transport

Introduction

Game farms are widespread throughout the world. Red deer (Cervus elaphus) are bred on a large scale in New Zealand (Fletcher 2002) as well as in Europe where a survey in 1997 confirmed the presence of 80,000 red deer hinds (females), 20,000 of which can be found in the UK (FEDFA 2007). In Italy, the number of red deer has decreased from 1,600 (Salghetti 1991), located mostly in the regions of Umbria and Toscana, to 1,000 as reported by Carnevali et al (2009) and Ramanzin et al (2010). This negative trend of the last decades could have occurred as a result of reductions in public subsidies responsible for the success of wild ungulate farming in Italy in the 1980s (FEDFA 2007; Ramanzin et al 2010). There are no recently published data available on precise numbers of farmed deer and game farms in Italy. Data provided by Provinces tend not to be updated at regional level and would appear to clearly underestimate the situation locally. It was confirmed, however, by competent local and regional authorities, that the majority of wild ungulate farms are situated in the regions of Emilia Romagna (Figure 1), Umbria and Toscana. Red deer appear to be bred most frequently but fallow deer farms also prevail in the region of Emilia-Romagna and in fenced areas throughout Italy (Carnevali et al 2009).

Breeding farms for venison are semi-intensive, and in the second category of the EFSA classification (2006), with free-ranging animals kept in fenced areas with shelters for feeding. Deer bred in semi-intensive farms are not accustomed to human contact which goes some way to explain the stress and flight reaction often observed. According to Weeks (2000), flight distances reduce with familiarity. Thus, knowledge of deer physiology, behaviour and general habitat plays a crucial role in helping reduce the negative impact of human influence during breeding (Mattiello 2009).

In Italy, deer bred for meat are transported to other farms and to game reserves for recreational hunting. They are seldom moved to the rare slaughterhouses authorised for game. In this study, four different examples of gathering and loading techniques are presented with the aim of highlighting challenges faced by the operators in Northern Italy and discrepancies between legislative requirements and their subsequent implementation. The legislation in place, regarding the protection of animals during transport and related operations (Regulation [EC] 1/2005), applies clearly