

MEPs toughen EU ban on the sale of seal products

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Fewer seals could be hunted for their fur thanks to a stronger EU ban on the trade in seal product, approved in plenary on Tuesday (631 MEPs in favour, 31 against, 33 abstentions). The new rules will extend the ban to products resulting from hunts to protect fishing stocks, although Inuit and other indigenous communities will continue to be exempt from the ban. These changes, already agreed with EU governments, are needed to bring EU regulation in line with World Trade Organization rules.

In response to animal welfare concerns, the EU banned in 2009 the trade in seal products, such as sealskin coats, mitts, bags or seal meat. This ban entered into force in 2010. However, it allowed two exceptions, one for products resulting from indigenous hunts and the other for small-scale hunts to ensure sustainable "marine resource management".

The ban was challenged by Canada and Norway in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In June 2014, it delivered a ruling which noted that the ban could be justified on moral grounds regarding the welfare of seals but required more clarification of the exceptions applied. To address the WTO concerns, the European Commission proposed an amendment to the current EU rules in February 2015.

What will change

Under the changes, which have already been agreed with EU governments, Inuits will be allowed to sell seal products in the EU only if their hunting methods have due regard to animal welfare, are a part of their tradition and contribute to its subsistence.

Meanwhile, an exception regarding seal products originating from hunts to protect fish stocks has been removed.

Proper information and impact assessment

At the insistence of MEPs, the Commission will be tasked with informing the public and customs officials about the new rules and the Inuit exception. They believe that this could help to counter the widespread negative portrayals and misunderstandings of seal hunts conducted by Inuits and other indigenous peoples.

Also, the Commission will have to report by the end of 2019 on the implementation of the new rules, paying particular attention to their impact on the Inuit community.

"We amended the Commission's proposal taking into consideration in particular the right to self-determination of the Inuit and other indigenous communities," said Cristian-Silviu Buşoi, a Romanian member of the EPP group who is responsible for steering the new rules through Parliament during the debate.

Next steps

The new rules will have to be approved by both the Parliament and the Council before they can enter into force.

Find out more

- Watch the debate on Monday 7 September from 17.00 CET:
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/home.html>

Article

- Press release on the deal with the Council: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/content/20150625IPR70818>
- Press release on the committee vote: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/content/20150604IPR62603>
- Commission information on the seal trade ban: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/biodiversity/animal_welfare/seals/seal_hunting.htm
- Information about the Commission proposal: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/biodiversity/animal_welfare/seals/pdf/trade_seal_products.pdf