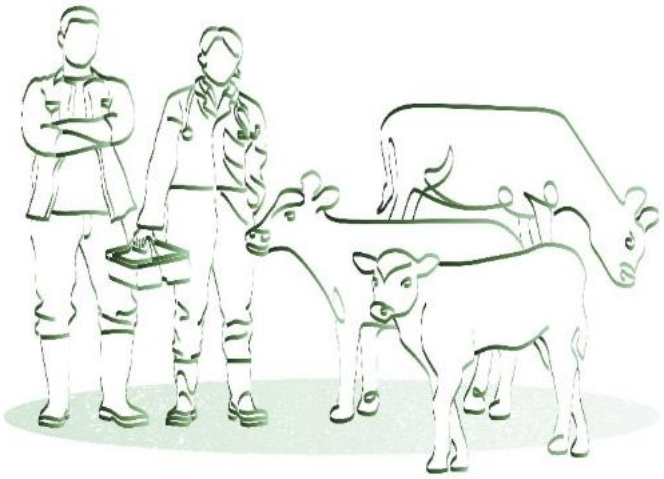
Inspector@work: Murcia, Spain



What is your current role and what are your main responsibilities? How many years have you been in this role?

I am an Animal Health Inspector based in Murcia, Spain. Murcia is one of the main points of departure for exports of livestock to third countries, primarily North Africa and the Middle East. Almost everything is exported: ruminants, cattle and sheep; horses are also exported, though somewhat more sporadically.

As inspectors, we are responsible for the duties assigned by the regulations to official veterinarians at the point of exit from the European Union in relation to animal welfare. Animal welfare checks, therefore, are one of the most important aspects of our day-to-day work. It is probably what takes up most of our time.

What motivated you to become an inspector?

One of the strengths we have in Murcia is the real opportunity to contribute to improving and ensuring the best conditions for the transport of animals, which is always a complicated task. But looking back to when I started, more than five years ago, I certainly see a positive development and feel that the work has been worthwhile.

Could you describe your training and career path before becoming an inspector?

Before entering the civil service, I think that, like most veterinary graduates, we tended towards clinical practice. I worked with both large and small animals, in Spain and abroad.

For a while, I also worked in a slaughterhouse, as an official veterinarian, although that stint was quite brief.

What do you like most about being an official inspector?

It's the chance to play a real part in the gradual improvement of animal welfare conditions for animals at such a critical stage as their transport.

Which areas or facilities do you inspect in relation to compliance with welfare requirements for ruminants and equines?

At the point of exit from the European Union, there are two areas of inspection. On the one hand, we are the final point, the destination for road transport that begins at the farms, where the animals are loaded and brought to the port. And

at the same time, we are the starting point for maritime transport, that is, where the animals are loaded onto livestock vessels for transport by sea to the third country.

This means we have to check both the road vehicles – when they arrive and in what condition – and whether the vessel will be suitable to accommodate the animals it is scheduled to carry.

Likewise, we oversee all the associated unloading operations at the port and the immediate subsequent loading of those animals onto the vessel.

What aspects of your work with ruminants and equines do you find particularly interesting or challenging? Could you give us some examples related to different aspects of your role?

Of the routine tasks that we carry out, the most challenging would be the inspections on livestock vessels, which are registered in a third country, accompanied by a foreign crew, with whom we have to discuss whether the facilities on board are suitable for the species they intend to load.

It is a challenge, particularly when a vessel arrives for which we have no recent records in Murcia, because we do not know in what condition it will arrive, nor can we easily check what conditions or defects it had on previous occasions, and we could find anything: for example, a cockroach infestation, dirtiness, nothing might be working, they have the wrong pens for transporting sheep, or even more bizarre issues. When it comes to ships that have visited many times and undergone numerous inspections, we already have them under control and they, too, know what to expect.

Another point I also consider sensitive is the implicit relationship – which is not always obvious – between the strictly sanitary requirements that the animals must meet at the third country's insistence and animal welfare.

In addition to animal welfare checks, we also carry out health checks to certify that the animals meet the third country's requirements. However, these requirements can change at any time due to a new outbreak of disease or a political situation. Political situations including war mean that animals due for export remain in transit with no possibility of reaching the port of destination, which is obviously a very important issue for animal welfare. Hence, this forces us to be extremely cautious when authorising shipments.

Could you describe some examples of good practice that you have observed during your inspections?

Everything starts with good planning; the best possible animal welfare conditions stem from good planning.

When the exporter properly schedules a staggered arrival of vehicles at the port, the waiting time of the animals on board will be kept to a minimum, thereby limiting potential risks of injury in the confined space of a lorry or on the ship. Or their exposure to inclement weather, especially here in Spain with the heat in summer; we want to ensure the animals are not out during the hottest hours of the day, and if, for whatever reason, they have to be out at such times, then it should be for as short a time as possible.

Planning is easy when there are only a few lorries, but there are exporters who undertake operations involving 15,000 lambs or 2,000 calves, which require 40, 50 or 60 lorries!

Preparation begins before the lorry arrives at the port, with the weather forecasts and plans that must be approved by the official authorities, always with the aim of minimising the animals' stress and the time spent in transit. This, in turn, benefits the staff involved in the loading, as if the loading process is smooth and quick, they will be less stressed; and

this, in turn, will indirectly lead to fewer disagreements between the shore and ship personnel, or the lorry drivers, who will handle the animals more gently.

Are there any other best practices you have identified during your years in this role that you could also share with us?

Compared to when I started, the shipments are now much more organised. When I started here, livestock shipments would arrive much more suddenly, from one day to the next.

To give an example, I might arrive at the port one day with a scheduled shipment and find there were already 20 lorries waiting, the port's maximum capacity, when the ship that was to carry the cargo was not even there, and not yet authorised. There could be issues meaning the shipment couldn't be loaded at that moment or on that day. That also puts us under pressure because these incidents have to be assessed and resolved at some point.

Let me give an example. There are 20 lorries waiting when we arrive; the ship might have a broken water trough – whilst it can be fixed, it takes three or four hours, during which time the animals will have to wait on board the lorries.

Fortunately, this has been resolved by the new regulations, which formally require ships to undergo inspection 24 hours before the scheduled loading date.

Those 24 hours give us all the time needed to safely rectify any deficiencies detected during the pre-loading inspection and if they cannot be rectified in time, loading can be delayed without any problem, as the animals have not yet been loaded at the farm.

Could you give an example of an approach that has been adopted to tackle poor management practices detected during inspections and which has led to long-term improvements? Again, you do not need to include any details that would allow the parties involved to be identified.

We now have databases or records of livestock exporting companies, and national registers of people with certified competence, which ultimately benefits the livestock and reduces any type of incident related to animal welfare.

When any issue arises, we automatically know who to contact and what to address, and that person also has administrative responsibility to effectively address the issue.

In your opinion, how has the welfare of ruminants and equines changed in your country over the last five years? Do you have any specific examples of changes in attitudes or practices that you've identified?

I firmly believe that we have seen a very positive development. Each party has a clear understanding of their obligations, and this has also helped to improve the specific training they are required to undergo. They are also gaining practical experience.

The sanctions imposed on each party for breaches of the legislation are an important lever, which forces exporters either to avoid such practices or to face the consequences of their breaches.

It seems straightforward now, but ensuring that animals are only handled by people with demonstrable training has been a persistent problem that has been difficult to eradicate; today, handling animals without causing them harm is required by everyone involved.

Another practice that springs to mind, which is now practically non-existent, was when lorries would frequently arrive without any bedding material, and this meant that we saw far more injuries, such as broken horns or lameness.

Does European Union legislation on animal welfare differ from that applied at national and international level?

European Union legislation is, obviously, the cornerstone. But in Spain, at least from my perspective, regarding the export of large numbers of animals by sea to third countries, certain specific requirements have been introduced that do not exist as such at the European Union level.

At national level, for example, great emphasis has been placed on regulating the conditions required to comply with these EU exit points. In other words, what facilities and staff must be available to act as exit points for live animal exports. Protocols have also been drawn up by colleagues in central services, setting out the obligations that must be fulfilled by livestock exporters, ensuring the highest possible level of protection during transport.

In Spain, too, there has been a strong focus on exports to third countries, aiming for a comprehensive view of the journey, from the point of origin on the farms to the final destination in the third country, with the exporter being held responsible for the entire route.

I recall that previously the exporter argued that they were only responsible for taking the animals to the port, and that what happened from the port to the third country was no longer their concern. I can say that this clear responsibility now exists.

There is also something called "an integrated logbook" for each shipment on board a vessel. In other words, we no longer have a logbook for each lorry. Previously, each of the 40 lorries could have made a perfect journey, but on arriving at the port they would find that there were 39 other lorries on the same route, and so they would get stuck there, causing further delays to the journey. This integrated logbook allows exporters to be aware that there are more lorries involved, not just one, and therefore they have to organise it properly.

In your experience, is there any specific aspect of the management of ruminants and equines where you would like to see animal welfare improved, and what changes would be necessary from a regulatory perspective?

We're always at some stage of change, at least from my perspective.

One thing that is missing is a centralised database at European Union level, containing all vehicles, transporters and individuals with a certificate of competence in animal handling, so that each Member State does not simply upload its own authorisations to this central register. I believe it is very important to maintain the centralised database, because when transporters from other Member States arrive, we still have to rely on the paper documentation they present.

In this area too, it would be helpful to have journey logs fully digitised, as we still rely on what transporters sign on paper.

Furthermore, and bearing in mind that this is perhaps a contentious issue at European Union level, from a legal perspective, I believe that the financial penalties are not severe enough to deter some livestock exporters from committing certain types of breaches. When we are talking about invoices worth millions of euros, the penalties may seem too lenient to be an effective deterrent.

Which aspects of the factsheets, or were there other EURCAW activities that have helped you in your role? Do you work with these factsheets, or have you been involved with EURCAW in the past?

The EURCAW *Ruminants & Equines* factsheets are discussed in training courses, particularly the Better Training for Safer Food courses on Animal Transport, and we do use the factsheets. As far as my role is concerned, naturally, the ones on fitness for transport are useful. And we are very grateful that there are factsheets for equines, cattle and small ruminants.

These factsheets help us, in a way, to objectively assess symptoms or injuries that might mean the animals cannot continue the journey, which in themselves can be very subjective symptoms. But as I said, the factsheets serve as a form of support and as an objective step to identify whether we need to intervene or not, or whether we need to report any kind of serious incident during transport.

Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything else you'd like to say regarding the welfare of ruminants and equines in Spain? How do you see the next five years?

There are significant challenges and we're not quite sure how they'll turn out. The issue of having an official veterinarian on board ships to monitor what happens during transport, which is actually the longest part of the journey.

We see them on day one, but then it might take three or four days for them to reach their destination, and we don't know what will happen. We'll have to see how transport is ultimately managed at the destination with animals in transit, which is also a problematic area that is being considered to see how it might be avoided. These are the challenges we face in the future.