Foie gras a serious health risk, MEPs told

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A meeting in Parliament was told that that current trends in the production of French delicacy foie gras could pose a health risk to consumers, including diabetes and Alzheimer's.

The meeting on Thursday, 'The cruelty behind the delicacy', also heard that since 1998, only three foie gras farms have been checked and each had presented problems.

Adolfo Sansolini, a consultant for Belgian animal advocacy organisation GAIA, said that this underlines the insufficient monitoring of foie gras production standards.

He said, "The European Commission has repeatedly stated that it does not have sufficient information on whether foie gras producers comply with EU laws but at the same time expresses no intention to address this situation."
Sansolini was addressing a meeting in Strasbourg of Parliament's intergroup on animal welfare.

Foie gras - or fattened duck or goose liver - is considered a delicacy by some but is denounced as cruel by animal rights campaigners due to the practice of force-feeding.

The meeting was timely as France, the country which is responsible for 75 per cent of the global production of foie gras, has just introduced a three-month ban on production.

Sansolini presented an analysis of over 20 parliamentary questions on foie gras production put forward and responded to by the Commission during this Parliament's term.

He said the analysis demonstrated the inconsistency of responses.

"It is fundamental," he said, "to stop penalising those producers who do not force-feed their animals."

The current EU regulation, he said, "not only creates a licence to force-feed but a duty to force-feed to keep businesses viable, preventing any voluntary improvements of animal welfare."

Another speaker, Christophe Marie, spokesperson of the Fondation Brigitte Bardot, said there was growing evidence that French citizens - the main consumers of foie gras in the world - now oppose the use of force-feeding in foie gras production.

A survey this year showed that 70 per cent of French people condemn force-feeding.

Marie said, "The results of the survey shows that precisely those consumers who appreciate foie gras the most would like to see it produced in a way that avoids the extreme suffering caused to animals by the practice of force-feeding. We invite politicians in France and in the EU to make the necessary legislative steps to end this form of animal abuse."

A video was presented to MEPs with excerpts from two investigations conducted by French organisation L214 showing particularly shocking, yet regularly recurring images of the inhumane treatment of animals farmed for foie gras production in France.

At the meeting, Donald Broom, of Cambridge University, one of the most eminent animal welfare scientists in the world, presented a new study on the welfare of ducks in foie gras production.

The Cambridge University study also cites possible health risks for consumers, based on the presence of amyloids, which are linked to Alzheimer's disease and Type II diabetes.

Broom said that present production patterns can no longer be seen as 'traditional' because the livers of ducks rather than geese are mostly used.

His study also found severe welfare problems in many aspects of foie gras production.

He said, "Birds in foie gras production are the only farmed animals not allowed to use their basic biological mechanisms to regulate their own food intake and welfare can never be good if birds are
"The increase in liver size caused by force-feeding is pathological, and causes poor welfare. Unless force-feeding is ended, and the housing conditions of the animals are improved, foie gras production will continue to be stigmatised by poor welfare."

The study, said Broom, highlights the need to avoid force-feeding.

French producers of foie gras have said they will lose millions of euros by the temporary ban in France.

The measure, which has been prompted by a bird flu scare, means breeders in 18 départements in south west France will not be allowed to have any ducks or geese in their slaughterhouses until August.

Globally, 20,000 tons of foie gras are produced per year with France producing 70 per cent and consuming 85 per cent of that total.

France exports nearly 5000 tonnes each year with its main export markets including Japan, Spain and Belgium. About 30,000 families in France depend on the sector for a living.

Force feeding - which involves putting pipes down the throats of the birds - is illegal in many countries, including the UK, but legal in France.

Animal rights group, Peta, has called the practice cruel and said the birds' livers can swell up to 10 times their nature size.

Responding to the meeting in Parliament, Jo Swabe, Executive Director of the Humane Society International/Europe, an advocacy group for animals, tweeted that animal welfare is compromised severely during foie gras production.

However, the European Association of Foie Gras producers hit back by saying it opposed efforts to curb production.

It tweeted, "Egyptians, Greeks, Romans...4500 years of foie gras history."

Earlier this year, former Baywatch actress Pamela Anderson called for a ban on the force-feeding of ducks and geese for foie gras.

Last May, MEPs decided that foie gras should not be banned from restaurants in the European Parliament.

The decision followed a campaign by several MEPs to remove foie gras from the menu over concerns for animal welfare.

The MEPs said the production of foie gras "inflicts immense suffering on ducks and geese" and it was "impossible to produce foie gras humanely."

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Martin Banks is a journalist for the Parliament Magazine
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