

To ignore minimal animal welfare requirements can become expensive

Swiss aquaculture factory «Melander» deleted in delusion

On the far east edge of Switzerland, the German tax exile Hans Raab has constructed an aquaculture factory which was designed to produce 1800 tons of fish per year, much more than the sum of all other aquaculture plants in Switzerland. A year ago, Raab began to produce African catfish in a minor quantity and to sell it under the fantasy name «Melander». The Swiss fish welfare organization «fair-fish» announced serious doubts about the keeping of the fish in this factory already a year ago. End of March, Raab came under fire mainly because of the manner he kills the fish. While the Swiss Animal Protection Law makes precise prescriptions about stunning and killing of fish, in Raab's factory the fish are only cooled and then centrifugalized together with ice, whereupon they die after 20 minutes.

fair-fish therefore required from the competent regional veterinary authority to interdict production and sale of fish by the «Melander» company unless a solution in conformity with the law will be installed. Simultaneously, fair-fish submitted a scientifically based and accomplishable proposal to Raab. Instead of going into it, Raab counterattacked with nebulous claims for compensation in the amount of at least 200 million euros and insulted via the media everybody not agreeing with him as «criminals»

Last friday however Raab ceded under increasing pressure of authorities and Swiss public. His decision to close the factory sets an end to a nasty chapter - the basic problem though remains unsolved. fair-fish demands that the Federal Veterinary Office to determine quickly how fish may be raised and kept, before new fish farm factories mushroom in Switzerland.

The proportionality was in danger of getting lost. A German industrialist who got cold feet in his country constructs the by far biggest aquaculture factory in Switzerland without caring a straw about the country's Animal Protection Law. But he didn't reckon with the pertinacity of the competent chief veterinary of the canton St. Gallen who menaced him by embargo. Blind by megalomania, Raab thought to be immune against «criminal» Swiss authorities to which he issued ultimata. In his blindness he called the Swiss Animal Protection Law as «criminal», a law, that is to say, that had been voted for by the overwhelming majority of the Swiss population. It is exactly this delusion which overthrew Raab's factory.

Main problem already in the first beginning

Had Raab listened to the early warnings of the canton's veterinary already in 2006, he would have looked for a stunning and killing method which conforms with animal protection criteria. With view to the scientific studies at hand already then, the non-conformity of Raab's method was evident. Thus the question before the construction of the factory could only be: Is there a conform method to stun and kill African catfish available yet or not? If not, the only logic consequence was to not begin to farm on this species. If however the method was available at that time already, Raab should have installed it right away.

Instead, Raab became obsessed with a third way that does not exist. This is why he failed and entirely by his own guilt.

The four methods for stunning of fish allowed in Switzerland are: blow on the head, electricity, mechanical deletion of the brain and (refused by fair-fish) neck breaking. Two methods are allowed to kill fish while stunned: bleeding or gutting.

Even if the killing of fish in other countries is carried out in a less «humane» manner, this is by no means an argument not to apply the Swiss law in Switzerland. Also the argument that Swiss prescriptions increase the costs of inland production compared with imported fish is false, at least in the «Melander» case as the Norwegian producer SeaSide brought into play by fair-fish is absolutely convinced that Raab could save some operating costs after having installed the Stansa automatical electrical stunner.

Agonizing killing is but the tip of the iceberg

While the Swiss Animal Protection Ordinance - which came into force last September after years of preparatory works - says clearly and without ambiguity how fish may be stunned and killed, it remains vague on breeding and keeping criteria. During the preliminary phase, fair-fish had consistently pointed out the tender spots and demanded that the Federal Veterinary Office fixes clear norms. Unfortunately in vain.

Instead the Office should decree now a technical ordinance on fish farming. In the «Melander» case, fair-fish has called attention to serious doubts concerning breeding and keeping of fish already in May 2008 and demanded that the Office goes ahead with the draft of a technical ordinance, again in vain. Even in the last days, the speaker of the Office was able to pretend that there is «no need for action». He even explained that no technical ordinance is needed «because the fish farm Melander does not conform with the law already».

fair-fish to awaken the Federal Veterinary Office

«Melander» dead, problem solved? Yes, if the concern of the ones working in the Office is to have some peace and quiet and not to look what happens outdoors in the world. As a matter of fact, only in the few last two major projects of new fish farms to be constructed in Switzerland have been knocking at the fair-fish door as they would like to assure themselves to be on the right path. The dormancy of the Office produces uncertainty. Legal uncertainty.

Of course fair-fish tries to advise interested fish farms within the limits of its possibilities. But before all fair-fish will increase now the pressure on the Federal Veterinary Office.

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