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Row erupts between Italy's Parma ham makers and activists over pig welfare

Parma ham industry accuses animal welfare groups of a smear campaign following the release of 'grim' images of pigs kept in filthy and barren conditions

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About this content

Andrew Wasley, Jordan Gass-Poore and Cecilia Ferrara

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Images of pigs in filthy pens and barren conditions have sparked a row between animal welfare activists and the makers of Italy's Parma ham.

The campaigners have [released footage](#) that they claim exposes barren living conditions with no stimulation, and injured animals with abscesses and hernias being left without adequate treatment. Their expose of the farms that produce meat for Parma and a small proportion of other hams follows a series of investigations over the last few years that have repeatedly appeared to reveal concerning conditions, such as pigs being treated roughly, and sick pigs being left to die in the corridors between their pens.

But the Parma ham industry has reacted with fury to the latest batch of images, saying they are part of "a smear campaign". The trade body, the Parma Ham Consortium, argue that it is "not credible that the deplorable

conditions shown in the images have escaped the eyes of the official vets in charge of control in the breeding farms”. They say that they condemn any violation of animal welfare standards, “but we cannot tolerate those who improperly use our fame just to get more visibility”.



▲ Italy's artisanal Parma ham production became increasingly industrialised after the second world war. Photograph: University of Parma

Over recent years, the industry has grown into a multimillion-euro business producing about nine million legs of Parma ham a year and employing 50,000 people. But it has also been hit by a number of animal welfare scandals, including footage secretly recorded over a six-month period at one farm and released by animal rights group Essere Animali in 2017 in which workers were filmed apparently moving animals out of pens using sticks, lifting them by their legs and throwing them on the floor. Dead and apparently sick animals were filmed left in corridors.

The most recent footage, released by Eurogroup for Animals earlier this week, appeared to show the use of gestation crates for the sows (banned in the UK), as well as farrowing crates and barren, dirty stalls. The organisation, a coalition of 54 NGOs around [Europe](#), called for the European Union and member states to “fully enforce EU pig welfare legislation”.

Paul Roger, a vet with the UK-based Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law Veterinary Association (AWSELVA), viewed some of the footage at the Guardian's request and expressed concerns at some of the conditions uncovered. “It is grim. There are clear signs of poor stockmanship, and a failure to satisfy the animals' basic needs,” he said.





▲ A screenshot from the footage released by Eurogroup for Animals. Photograph: Eurogroup for animals

He noted an injury on one pig that was probably caused by the bad fit of the farrowing crate, and pointed out that the crates' slats were too wide for the piglets' feet. Roger also said that, in his opinion, the lack of stimulation in the fattening pens meant that the pigs were getting bored and biting each other; "that abscess on the tail is infected, and is the result of tail biting because the pigs don't have enough to do."

Under EU law, farmers are required to provide: "permanent access to a sufficient quantity of material to enable proper investigation and manipulation activities, such as straw, hay, wood, sawdust, mushroom compost, peat or a mixture of such, which does not compromise the health of the animals".

The **Guardian and Bureau of Investigative Journalism** were invited on to an entirely different farm that also breeds pigs for Parma and other hams last week by an industry body. The first room contained perhaps 100 adult female pigs, housed in gestation crates or sow stalls, designed for holding pigs for the first four weeks of their pregnancy, with room to stand up or sit down but not to turn around. Gestation crates were banned in the UK in 1999 and are also illegal in Sweden. In mainland Europe pigs may be held in gestation crates for no longer than four weeks after insemination.

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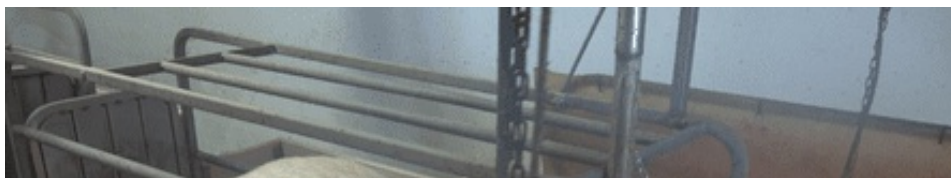
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The farm also employed farrowing crates, which house pigs that have recently given birth: metal bars hold the adult pigs in the middle of the crates in an area which prevents them turning around (but allows them to stand or lie down) so that the piglets can move safely around them without fear of crushing. Farrowing crates have been outlawed in parts of Scandinavia and in Switzerland, but are legal in most of Europe, including the UK.

In a third room in the complex, groups of half a dozen or so pigs are housed in a series of identical square pens. Some pens are bare, with no visible straw or bedding, wooden floors and a single, swinging "enrichment" toy hanging from a metal chain. This is to give the animals some entertainment. The conditions were similar, structurally, to the farms in the undercover footage, but there were fewer of the problems highlighted by Roger. Narrower slats had been provided for the piglets; the pens were far cleaner, the pigs looked healthy, and attempts had been made to provide 'enrichment'.

Supporters of the Parma ham industry say it is a traditional, natural product, intrinsically connected to another iconic Italian foodstuff, Parmigiano reggiano, (also known as Parmesan cheese) also produced in the region. In a tradition still practised today, whey created during cheese production is often fed to Parma piglets. The high-protein food helps the pigs get lovely and fat, says one farmer: "That's why the fat pig's thigh has the characteristic thick strip of fat that keeps the future ham tender and sweet."





▲ A sow in a farrowing crate. Photograph: Guardian/Bureau of Investigative Journalism

The production has long been industrialised, explains Prof Carolina Pugliese, from the School of Agriculture at the University of Florence. “After the second world war, swine breeding - as with all agri-food production - got concentrated in North **Italy** and went towards intensive farming.”

And Stefano Fanti, the director of the Parma Ham Consortium, explained to the Guardian how what was once a local, artisanal product became a valuable, globally recognised brand: “The market has grown up with the industry and with demand and we had to put in effect a sort of traceability system,” he says. “In the 70s we had the first protection Italian law for Prosciutto di Parma, a state law that says what are the pigs [that can] become Parma hams, how to salt the ham, how to cure it.”

In response to last year’s revelations the Consortium began developing welfare guidelines together with CRPA (Research Centre on Animal Production), Milan University, the National Breeding farmers’ Association and other research centres, and those are due to be rolled out in the next couple of months, according to Fanti - including leaflets and training sessions for pig breeders that highlight ways to improve welfare. The Consortium asked for “immediate interventions” from veterinary officials when the evidence went public, he says, but points out that it is not a regulatory body and can’t intervene directly.

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Fanti told the Guardian, in relation to previous investigations, that in matters regarding animal welfare, the organisation refers to existing European rules which are mandatory for all breeding farms. He accepts there may have been shortcomings in standards in some cases previously but believes these were ‘bad apples’ rather than representative of the industry as a whole.

But they are furious about this week’s campaign footage, and say: “In a smear campaign against Parma ham by, for some years now, some animal welfare organisations [are] regularly spread[ing] shocking images to convince the consumer not to buy our product any more. The Consortium always condemns any violation of the most elementary animal welfare standards that represent a criminal act, intolerable in a civilised society, but we cannot tolerate those who improperly use our fame just to get more visibility.”

Parma ham is no longer a small, artisanal industry.

“It is not credible that deplorable conditions shown in the images have escaped the eyes of the official vets in charge of control in the breeding farms. **Animal welfare**, we have to remember, is regulated by a European law valid in all EU-countries and the control is up to the Ministry of Health through the National Veterinary and local service.”

Some believe that activists are using the footage to raise concern about practices which are, when used properly, legal and useful to the sector. Farrowing crates for example, says Roger, are a helpful way to reduce mortality in piglet litters in an industrial setting. “In the wild, pigs build a kind of nest, but a corollary of that in an industrial setting could be higher mortality rates for the piglets as it may limit access by stocks men.”

“If you’re keeping animals you have a duty to look after them to the best of your abilities,” he says. “But consumers want cheap meat, so we need to have a nuanced, careful conversation about how we raise animals.”

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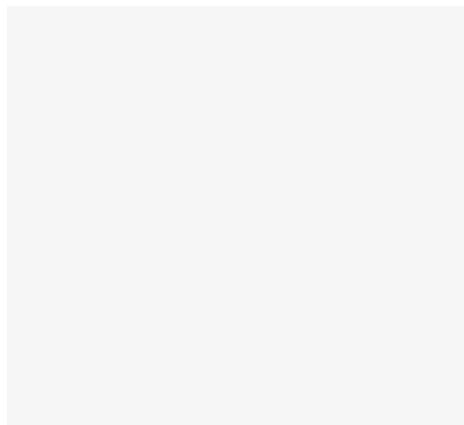
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