

12 March 2025

Olivér Várhelyi
Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare
European Commission

Dear Commissioner,

We write to express our deep concern regarding the alarming events surrounding the livestock vessel *Express M*, which departed from Romania for Haifa on Saturday, 22 February at 14:30 with around 2400 cattle and 460 sheep on board. Shortly after departure, the vessel stopped and remained at anchor until Tuesday, 25 February, before resuming its journey at an abnormally slow speed of 3–4 knots, significantly below its normal sailing speed of at least 10 knots.

On Thursday 27 February, the vessel unexpectedly changed course, heading north for several hours - seemingly returning to Romania - before altering its route course again towards the Bosphorus Strait. Upon reaching the strait, the vessel again went to anchor, on 28 February at 06:05, where it remained stationary until 3 March at 02:48.

By that time, the animals had already been at sea for 9 days—far exceeding the expected journey duration of 5–6 days—raising serious concerns about feed shortages. The Romanian authorities were alerted, and we were informed that the vessel had encountered engine failure. The captain was initially instructed to return to Romania but chose to continue the voyage, claiming the issue had been resolved. Although the vessel supposedly took on additional feed while anchored off Istanbul, the two boats seen supplying the vessel were too small to have carried sufficient provisions for the extended journey. Furthermore, given the originally planned short duration of transport, it is unlikely that sufficient sawdust was available on board to maintain proper hygiene in the animal pens, which must have been heavily soiled after so many days at sea.

The vessel went to anchor for a third time on 4 March at approximately 02:30, remaining there for 20 hours before resuming its voyage at a slow speed of 6–7 knots. **The animals finally arrived at Haifa port on 9 March at 16:20, after an exhausting 15 days at sea.** The repeated slow sailing and prolonged anchoring significantly extended the journey, undoubtedly compromising the health and welfare of the animals on board.

The *Express M* is an ageing vessel, built in 1983 (42 years ago), with a history of significant deficiencies. In 2020, the vessel was detained at Waterford Port, Ireland, due to multiple safety issues, leading to the revocation of its certificate of approval. It has been detained on at least four other occasions: in 2009 (Falmouth, UK), 2018 (Tarragona, Spain), 2020 (Sines, Portugal), and most recently in December 2024 (Sines, Portugal) for the duration of four weeks, when it was found to have 26 deficiencies, including issues related to ship safety construction, navigation, international ship security, and pollution prevention. In April 2018, the vessel—then operating under the name *Atlantic M*—was detained in Tarragona (Spain) for five days after 4,000 lambs and 1,700 calves had been loaded. Reports from passing vessels described strong odours emanating from the ship.

There exist doubts if this vessel has a valid EU certificate to transport animals due to some unclarities from the competent authorities in charge.

It is also noteworthy that *Express M* operates under the flag of Panama, which is classified as a grey flag by the Paris MoU, highlighting the high-risk nature of vessels operating under such registries. This incident reinforces the urgent need for the revised transport regulation to prohibit the use of vessels operating under both black and grey-listed flags, given the substantial risks they pose to animals, crew, and the environment.

This latest incident once again demonstrates the inherent risks of live animal transport by sea. We cannot ensure the safety and welfare of animals once they leave EU shores, and time and again, serious welfare breaches occur. In this case, thousands of animals were stranded at sea under unacceptable conditions, undoubtedly enduring severe suffering.

We urge the European Commission to take immediate action by engaging with the Romanian authorities to clarify why the vessel was not ordered to return to Midia port when engine failure was first reported. The decision to continue the journey despite serious mechanical issues was reckless and should not have been permitted. Furthermore, the *Express M* must have its certificate of approval revoked immediately, if it has one, to prevent further risks to animal welfare and maritime safety.

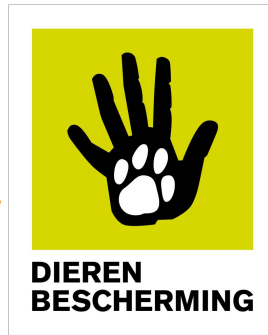
This case underscores the urgent need to phase out live animal transport by sea. We call on the Commission to prioritise this objective in the ongoing revision of the Transport Regulation, ensuring that such unacceptable incidents are no longer permitted within the EU.

We appreciate your attention to this urgent matter and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Eurogroup for Animals
Ethical Farming Ireland
Animal Welfare Foundation e.V.
Dierenbescherming
Lega Anti Vivisezione
Djurskyddet Sverige
Project 1882
Society for Animals, CZ
La Fondation Droit Animal
Eyes on Animals
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