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Article Title:

E.U. May Punish Italy for Stalemate on Animal Research

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A legislative stalemate over animal research could become costly for Italy. On 23 January, the [European Commission](#) asked the [E.U. Court of Justice](#) ^[1] to impose a fine of more than €4.5 million per month for failing to incorporate a 2010 E.U. directive on animal testing into its national laws. A new law on animal tests has been the subject of a fierce debate in Italy.

[E.U. directive 2010/63](#) ^[2] aims to harmonize the protection of animals in research across the European Union and minimize their use by requiring alternatives to be used when available. All 27 E.U. member states

were supposed to have “transposed” the directive in national legislation by 10 November 2012. Six other countries—Finland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, the Netherlands, and Poland—have failed to do so, for various reasons. A spokesperson for the Environment Directorate-General says the commission may ask for punishment for those countries, too; their cases don't all move at the same speed, he says. Whether a fine is actually imposed is up to the court.

In Italy's case, the directive's transposition has become entangled in a struggle over the future of animal testing in the country. A draft law that is now wending its way through the political system would put far-reaching limitations on animal testing that go well beyond those required by the European Union, and some wonder whether it is in compliance with the E.U. directive. If not, that could cause further problems for the country in the future.

The latest development in the political process came on the same day the commission referred Italy's case to the court, when the Senate's Committee on Health and Hygiene approved the current draft bill. The bill still has to go to a committee at the Chamber of Deputies before it comes back to the government for the president's signature. Scientists say the law would damage scientific research in the country, [and they recently launched a petition in protest](#) ^[3]. But the current version of the bill would postpone until 2017 three controversial bans: on drug abuse research involving animals; xenotransplantation; and breeding dogs, cats, and nonhuman primates for scientific purposes.

Countries are allowed to have more restrictive rules than those in the E.U. directive only if they were already in place before September 2010. This is not the case for Italy, which could expose the country to a so-called infringement procedure by the commission. Emilia Grazia De Biasi, chair of the Senate's Health and Hygiene Committee, has asked the government to assess whether the new law would be compliant with the E.U. directive.

Italy should just transpose the directive without further modifications, as most countries have done, says Roberto Caminiti, a physiologist at the University of Rome La Sapienza and chair

of the Committee on Animals in Research for the Federation of European Neuroscience Societies. Postponing the most controversial restrictions in the law is "a clumsy attempt to have the best of both worlds," he says. Caminiti says Italian politicians don't know or care enough about science to resist the animal rights movement and blames media for spreading "misinformation" about animal research.

Ilaria Capua, a former avian influenza researcher and now a member of the Chamber of Deputies, agrees that Italy should respect its obligations within the European Union and pass a law that is compliant with the directive. Not doing so—and incurring a fine—is "expensive nonsense," Capua says. But Michela Kuan, a biologist and a member of the animal rights group Lega Anti Vivisezione [4] in Rome, says Italy's problems weren't caused by animal rights activists or the political debate, but by the animal research lobby. Kuan hopes that the 3-year delay will be taken out of the legislation.

Links:

[1] http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-46_en.htm

[2] <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:276:0033:0079:en:PDF>

[3] <http://news.sciencemag.org/europe/2013/12/thousands-italian-scientists-protest-strict-limits-animal-research>

[4] <http://www.lav.it/>