

Moshe Shalev, MSc, VMD, Column Editor

British Government Releases Plan to Protect Scientists and Industry from Animal Rights Extremists

On 30 July, in a significant and bold move, the UK Home Office and Department of Trade and Industry published a 22-page report entitled “Animal Welfare—Human Rights: Protecting People from Animal Rights Extremists¹”. The report outlines planned legislative actions by the British government to control animal rights activists².

The document praises British companies and individuals that have withstood continual intimidation from extremists; it also highlights the British Government’s determination to prohibit extremists from dictating what businesses can and cannot do, and its resolve to ensure that legitimate, legal research that has the potential to alleviate human suffering and pain, should continue without intimidation. The report describes the background of the animal rights extremist activities in England that prompted this publication, the government response to animal rights extremists, and future actions the government plans to take in order to protect British scientists, institutions, and firms from harassment and damage caused by animal rights activists that it has labeled extremists.

Among the actions the British government will take are the following:

- Allow police to arrest people for home demonstrations, ban protesters from targeted homes for three months, and strengthen anti-harassment laws designed to protect the scientific community from animal rights activists;
- Give police new powers to tackle protests outside homes more effectively and to help stop the harassment of employees of companies;

- Propose legislation that will make it illegal to protest outside homes in such a way that causes harassment, alarm, or distress to residents. The proposal would not affect the right to picket peacefully at a workplace;
- Limit the number of repeat offenders by amending section 42 of the Criminal Justice and Police Act of 2001 to make it illegal for a person who has been officially warned by police to return to the vicinity of the premises within 3 months for the purposes of pressuring the resident to comply with their wishes;
- Extend the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 to cover harassment of two or more people who are connected (*e.g.*, employees of the same company) even if each individual is harassed on only one occasion; and
- Coordinate legislation, policy and action by industry, the police, Crown Prosecution Service, and others to deal effectively with problems associated with the hosting of sensitive material (*e.g.*, home addresses or other personal information) on animal extremist websites. Law enforcement will seek to identify individuals responsible for the writing and posting of material on websites where it is associated with an offense, and take action including, where appropriate, criminal prosecutions.

The report also details a number of existing provisions that can be used to prosecute animal rights extremists in the UK. These existing laws include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The “Public Order Act 1986” aims to prevent threatening or harassing speech, displays, or actions;
- The “Malicious Communications Act 1988” makes it illegal to send threatening emails and faxes, or make phone calls intended to cause distress or anxiety;
- The “Terrorism Act 2000” targets individuals who commit violent acts for the purpose of advancing a political, religious, or ideological cause.

UK scientists welcomed the Government’s proposals, but also noted potentially serious gaps. Of particular importance is how the report focuses solely on industry and does not address the security needs of universities and other private institutions³. Animal rights activists complained that the proposed laws were too general and might be used to prevent legal protests^{3,4}.

References

1. Home Office Press Releases. Animal Welfare: Human Rights—protecting people from animal rights extremists. (30 July 2004). http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/n_story.asp?item_id=1046.
2. Home Office. Animal Welfare—Human Rights: protecting people from animal rights extremists. (30 July 2004). <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs3/humanrights.pdf>.
3. Jha, A. & Bowcott, O. Scientists cautiously welcome plan, but point to gaps. *The Guardian* (31 July 2004). <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/homeaffairs/story/0,11026,1273229,00.html>.
4. News. Telegraph. Crackdown on animal rights extremists. *The Telegraph* (30 July 2004). <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2004/07/30/uanimal.xml&sSheet=/portal/2004/07/30/ixportaltop.html>.