



Animal Welfare and the Science of Animal Consciousness: A Plan, and Its Test in 2026

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This plan is an initial draft prepared with AI models. It is open for review by subject-matter experts and will be revised as they join the work and as world and national events change.

Introduction

Humans kill more than 80 billion land animals for food each year, most of them chickens raised in industrial systems. Fishing and fish farming add an estimated 1.1 to 2.2 trillion wild-caught fish a year and 78 to 171 billion farmed fish ([Mood and Brooke, Animal Welfare](#)). If these animals can suffer, the harm exceeds any purely human problem in the number of beings affected, and the scientific case that many of them can suffer has grown steadily since 2012.

Animal welfare is also tied to poverty and climate: livestock supports the livelihoods and food security of almost 1.3 billion people, many of them poor, and the sector produces an estimated 14.5 percent of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions ([World Bank](#)). About 56 percent of the wild fish caught in 2010 were reduced to fishmeal and fish oil, much of it fed to farmed animals, instead of being eaten by people ([Mood and Brooke, Animal Welfare](#)). Relative to its scale, the problem receives little public money or legislative time.

This essay sets out an eight-part plan to reduce animal suffering in farming, fishing, research and the new insect industry, then tests each part against what governments, courts, companies and investors did in 2025 and 2026.

Where things stand

Numbers of animals. Food and Agriculture Organization data for 2021 show about 73.8 billion chickens, 4.3 billion ducks, 1.4 billion pigs and 332 million cattle slaughtered for meat ([Our World in Data](#)). The fishcount estimates cited above put wild-caught fish at 87.5 percent of all vertebrates killed for human consumption in 2019 ([Mood and Brooke, Animal Welfare](#)).

Rethink Priorities estimated in June 2020 that 1 trillion to 1.2 trillion insects were then being raised each year for food and feed, with 79 to 94 billion alive on farms on an

average day ([Rethink Priorities](#)). A separate Rethink Priorities model published in December 2024 projects that about 3.9 trillion black soldier fly larvae and mealworms will be harvested each year by 2030 in its median scenario ([Rethink Priorities](#)).

At least 192.1 million animals were used for scientific purposes worldwide in 2015, the most recent global estimate. More recent national figures show 9.1 million uses across the EU and Norway in 2023 and 2.63 million procedures in Great Britain in 2024 ([Cruelty Free International](#)).

The science. The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, proclaimed on 7 July 2012, stated that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates of consciousness and that all mammals and birds, and “many other creatures, including octopuses,” possess them ([Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness](#)). The New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness of 19 April 2024, now signed by 610 researchers, found “strong scientific support” for conscious experience in mammals and birds and “at least a realistic possibility” of it in all vertebrates and in cephalopods, decapod crustaceans and insects, and it concluded that ignoring such a possibility in decisions affecting an animal is irresponsible ([New York Declaration](#)).

In February 2025 Kristin Andrews of York University, Jonathan Birch of the London School of Economics and Jeff Sebo of New York University set out in *Science* a “marker method” for weighing such evidence: pick a specific dimension of consciousness, such as feeling pain, and look for behavioural and anatomical markers of it in the target species. Where the best explanation of a behaviour in humans involves conscious experience, similar behaviour in an animal counts as some evidence of experience there too. The authors stress that the weight of any single marker depends on context ([ScienceDaily, reporting Andrews, Birch and Sebo in Science](#)).

The best-known policy use of this approach is Birch’s 2021 review for the UK government, which tested more than 300 studies against eight criteria and concluded that cephalopod molluscs and decapod crustaceans should be regarded as sentient ([LSE; Animal Welfare](#)). The Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 then covered all vertebrates, cephalopod molluscs and decapod crustaceans, and allowed ministers to add other invertebrates by regulation ([legislation.gov.uk](#)).

Law. EU law describes animals as sentient beings in Article 13 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, as the dogs and cats welfare regulation signed on 17 June 2026 restates ([Council of the EU](#)). The EU banned conventional battery cages for laying hens in 2012 but still permits enriched cages ([EU Perspectives](#)). For fish, the EU slaughter regulation applies only its general rule that animals “shall be spared any avoidable pain, distress or suffering during their killing” ([Regulation \(EC\) No 1099/2009](#)). The EU directive on the protection of farmed animals excludes invertebrates other than cephalopods, even though EU law classifies insects reared for feed as farmed animals ([Zięty et al., Insects](#)).

In the United States the federal Animal Welfare Act covers warm-blooded animals used in research, exhibition and the pet trade and excludes livestock and poultry raised for food or fibre ([USDA National Agricultural Library](#)). Fifteen states have passed laws on the confinement of pigs, hens or calves, and the Supreme Court upheld California's Proposition 12 in May 2023 ([Humane World for Animals](#)).

Part I: The plan

The plan applies the precautionary principle of the New York Declaration: governments take proportionate steps wherever sentience is a realistic possibility, and they rank actions by the number of animals affected, the severity of the suffering and the cost of acting.

1. Put sentience into law and give it an expert body

Legislatures should recognise in statute that vertebrates, cephalopods and decapod crustaceans are sentient and create a standing expert committee to report on the welfare effects of government policy. The UK Act, the working model, requires the Secretary of State to appoint an Animal Sentience Committee, lets the committee report on whether any government policy has had "all due regard" to its effect on animals as sentient beings, and obliges ministers to lay a response before Parliament within three months of each report ([legislation.gov.uk](#)). The same evidence-based method should be applied to farmed insects before that industry reaches the trillions of animals projected for 2030.

2. End cages and crates, with fixed dates and help for farmers

Cages for laying hens and crates for breeding sows affect more mammals and birds than any other confinement system. Legislatures should set a date after which no new cage or crate systems may be installed, followed by a full phase-out six to ten years later, which matches normal equipment replacement cycles. Transition grants and low-cost credit should cover part of the conversion cost for small and medium farms, and the same standards should apply to imports so that domestic producers are not undercut.

The EU's 2012 battery cage ban shows that a dated phase-out can be carried through, and the 2025 EggTrack report of Compassion in World Farming found that companies with cage-free pledges had on average completed 85 percent of their transition, with more than 160 million hens a year now kept out of cages as a result ([New Food](#)). Pledges can be withdrawn, so the plan puts the dates into law.

3. Fix the broiler chicken

Meat chickens suffer mainly from breeding for very fast growth, which leaves many birds with trouble walking, and from crowding. Governments should set maximum stocking densities, require slower-growing breeds over a transition period, and end the killing of

day-old male chicks in the egg industry through in-ovo sexing, which identifies male embryos before they hatch. More than 300 million male chicks are killed each year in the EU ([Eurogroup for Animals](#)). Germany, France and Italy have banned the practice, and by June 2026 about 40 percent of commercial laying hens in the EU had been sexed in ovo, at a cost in Europe of less than one euro cent per egg ([Innovate Animal Ag](#)). Breed change is also feasible commercially: Waitrose, REMA 1000 Norge and Norsk Kylling have met every criterion of the Better Chicken Commitment, which includes slower-growing breeds ([Food and Beverage Business Europe](#)).

4. Protect fish, crustaceans and cephalopods at slaughter and on farms

Fish are the most numerous vertebrates humans kill and the least protected by law. Governments should require effective stunning before slaughter for farmed fish, starting with the species farmed in the largest numbers, and should set stocking density and water quality standards. Norway already requires that farmed fish be stunned without significant stress or pain and stay unconscious until death, and it banned carbon dioxide stunning of fish in 2012. A 2025 assessment by its scientific committee for food and environment found that documentation of stunning methods remains weak for species other than salmon, a gap that other countries should close from the start ([VKM](#)).

Live boiling and live dismemberment of crustaceans should be banned where humane methods such as electrical stunning exist, and commercial octopus farming, for which no welfare standard exists, should be prohibited before it begins. In wild-capture fishing the practical steps are to shorten the time fish spend alive on deck and to reduce the catch of small forage fish for fishmeal.

5. Regulate insect farming before it scales

Before insect farming grows to trillions of animals a year, regulators should require slaughter methods that kill instantly, set basic standards for density, temperature and feeding, and fund research on insect sentience. The EU can start by bringing farmed insects within the scope of its farm animal welfare directive, from which invertebrates are now excluded. The Netherlands has already put insect-specific provisions into national law ([Zięty et al., Insects](#)). Acting now is cheap because few large farms exist.

6. Replace animals in research where science allows

Regulators should accept validated non-animal methods, including organoids, organ-on-chip systems, computational toxicology and human data, wherever they perform as well as animal tests, and should publish dated timetables for retiring specific tests. Research funders should pay for the validation studies that let regulators accept alternatives, and priority should go to tests that cause severe suffering or that use dogs and primates.

7. Invest in alternative proteins as a public good

Alternative proteins will displace factory-farmed products only when they match them on price and taste. Governments should fund open-access research on crop proteins, fermentation and cell culture, build shared pilot-scale production facilities, and give novel foods a clear, science-based approval route. The Good Food Institute puts the public investment needed for the sector to mature at \$10.1 billion a year; cumulative government investment since 2021 across 33 countries is about \$2.5 billion ([vegconomist](#)).

8. Protect livelihoods and poorer countries

The rules above should apply first to industrial operations in high- and upper-middle-income countries, where most confined animals live and where alternatives are affordable. Smallholders and pastoralists in low-income countries, for whom animals are savings, insurance and food, should instead get support for vaccination and veterinary care, which raises welfare and incomes together. Development banks that finance livestock expansion should attach welfare conditions to loans for industrial facilities.

Sequencing

The first two years should bring sentience committees, bans on installing new cages and crates, stunning rules for the main farmed fish, a moratorium on octopus farming, insect slaughter standards and dated timetables for retiring specific animal tests. In years three to ten the cage and crate phase-outs, broiler standards and chick-culling bans take effect while public investment in alternative proteins builds, and over the longer term cheaper alternatives reduce the number of animals farmed.

What makes it stick politically

Farm animal welfare measures usually pass when put to voters; a 2022 Data for Progress poll found 80 percent of American voters, in roughly equal shares across parties, supporting a law like Proposition 12 in their own state ([Humane World for Animals](#)). Reforms last when farmers get time and money to convert, when imports must meet the same rules, and when large retailers have already committed and want the law to bind their competitors. They fail when they appear to raise food prices during an inflation shock or when an industry persuades a national legislature to override state rules.

Where reasonable people disagree

- **How much animal suffering counts.** Some philosophers hold that full moral status depends on rationality or moral agency, which animals lack, so that animals deserve protection from cruelty but not equal consideration of their interests; many religious traditions give humans a special place while calling for kindness to animals. Others, following Peter Singer, hold that suffering counts equally whoever experiences it.

- **The evidence for fish and invertebrates.** The consciousness scientist Hakwan Lau argued in November 2024 that the New York Declaration’s evidence shows flexible behaviour, which is distinct from subjective experience, and that claiming “strong evidence” implies a reliable measure of consciousness that does not yet exist ([The Transmitter](#)). The marker method’s authors also accept that a single marker proves little. Supporters of precaution reply that a stunning rule is a cheap response to a realistic possibility; critics answer that precaution without a clear threshold could justify almost any rule.
- **Food prices and farm livelihoods.** Higher welfare standards raise costs. A 2023 Purdue University study cited by the Justice Department estimated that California’s egg rules raised prices for California consumers by 25 to 73 cents a dozen ([Agri-Pulse](#)). Britain’s National Farmers’ Union argues that a cage ban would raise imports of eggs produced to lower standards and push some producers out of business ([NFU](#)). Rules written for industrial farms could also harm poor livestock keepers if applied without care.
- **Research value.** Animal studies underpin much of modern medicine. In a paper in *Trends in Biotechnology* publicised in February 2026, legal scholars led by Sara Gerke called many replacement methods “not yet ready for prime time,” judged the FDA’s three-to-five-year timeline “likely overly optimistic,” and recommended that drug developers keep running animal tests in parallel until the alternatives are validated ([University of Illinois](#)).
- **Reform or abolition.** Some advocates think welfare reforms entrench animal farming by making it more acceptable to consumers. Others think incremental reform is the only path that can pass legislatures and help animals alive now.

Part II: The plan in the world of September 2026

Element 1, sentience law: the UK committee at work, no equivalent elsewhere

The UK’s Animal Sentience Committee is working as the Act intended. After its February 2025 report found poor coordination and transparency in the enforcement of animal welfare law, the government accepted in June 2025 recommendations to publish more enforcement data and update farm inspection protocols, and rejected a central coordinating body on grounds of cost ([GOV.UK](#)). The Home Office, in a letter to its Animals in Science Committee dated 6 March 2026, endorsed a phased approach for decapods used in science, starting with industry-led welfare standards and leading possibly to their protection under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 ([Home Office](#)).

The Animal Welfare Strategy for England, published on 22 December 2025, carried the sentience findings into farm policy. It commits the government to consult on phasing out enriched colony cages, work towards ending farrowing crates, ban carbon dioxide

stunning of pigs subject to consultation, support moves away from fast-growing chicken breeds, and put humane slaughter requirements for farmed fish into law, and it states that live boiling is not an acceptable way to kill decapods ([GOV.UK](#)). The strategy gives no dates for most of these measures.

The Commission's list of pending EU animal welfare legislation contains no standing expert body with a statutory duty to report on the welfare effects of policy ([European Commission](#)), and the text of the House-passed US farm bill does not mention animal sentience ([H.R. 7567, engrossed text](#)). On the published record, element 1 remains a UK practice with no counterpart in the EU or at US federal level.

Element 2, cages and crates: firm plans in Europe, a fight in the United States

European Union. On 8 July 2026, five years after it answered the End the Cage Age citizens' initiative of 1.4 million signatures, the Commission published a Livestock Strategy committing it to propose rules for laying hens and broilers in 2026, including a phase-out of cages, an end to the systematic killing of male chicks and equivalent requirements for imports ([Animal Equality UK](#)). The Commission's own schedule puts the hens and broilers proposal at the end of 2026 and a proposal on pigs, including the move from crates to pens, in the second quarter of 2027 ([European Commission](#)). Advocacy groups estimate the measures could take more than 160 million hens, broilers and sows out of cages but note that calves, rabbits and geese are not covered ([Animal Welfare Observatory](#)).

The Commission's December 2023 proposal on animal transport, covering about 1.6 billion animals a year ([European Commission](#)), is still being negotiated; as of June 2026 the European Parliament's lead committees had not voted on it ([Council of the EU](#)). The EU design matches element 2, with fixed phase-outs and import equivalence, but the farm proposals are unpublished and would take years to become law.

United Kingdom. The four UK governments consulted from 12 January to 9 March 2026 on banning all cages for laying hens, pullets and breeder layers. The options run from a ban on new installations in 2027 and on all cage production in 2032 to a full ban in 2037 ([Welsh Government](#)). The NFU opposes any ban, and the governments had not published their response by late September 2026 ([NFU](#)).

United States: the courts. In July 2025 the Justice Department sued California, arguing that Proposition 12 and related egg laws were preempted by the federal Egg Products Inspection Act. On 18 March 2026 federal Judge Mark Scarsi dismissed the complaint because the department had not alleged facts showing standing, gave it 14 days to amend, and did not rule on preemption ([Order, United States v. California](#)). The government filed an amended complaint on 1 April, and California moved again to dismiss on 8 May ([Civil Rights Litigation Clearinghouse](#)). No ruling on the renewed motions had been reported by

late September, and California's rules remain in force. The Supreme Court declined further industry challenges to Proposition 12 in June 2025 and to Massachusetts's Question 3 in June 2026 ([Humane World for Animals](#)).

United States: Congress. The farm bill is the larger threat to state laws. On 30 April 2026 the House passed the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026 (H.R. 7567) by 224 to 200 ([Capital Press](#)). Section 12006 of the House-passed text bars states from enforcing production standards on livestock "other than for covered livestock physically raised in such State," including as a condition of sale. "Covered livestock" means animals raised for slaughter or dairy and excludes animals raised mainly for egg production ([H.R. 7567, engrossed text](#)). The section would therefore stop California and Massachusetts from applying their pig and calf confinement rules to meat from other states while leaving their egg rules untouched.

The Senate Agriculture Committee's bill, the Agricultural Act of 2026, failed 10 to 11 on 6 August and passed 12 to 11 on 16 September without that language, after Chairman John Boozman ruled out of order Senator Joni Ernst's attempt to add it ([Western Livestock Journal](#)). Boozman expects a floor vote after the November midterm elections ([NACo](#)), and the question will then pass to a conference between the two chambers.

Companies. USDA estimated the cage-free laying flock at 150.7 million hens in August 2026 ([USDA AMS](#)), against 319 million hens producing table eggs on 1 September ([USDA NASS](#)), so about 47 percent of the US flock is now cage-free. Internationally, EggTrack found that only 198 of 415 commitments due in 2025 had been met, and 50 companies, including Unilever and Krispy Kreme, had withdrawn their pledges ([New Food](#)).

Element 3, broilers: breed change lags

No binding breed or density standard exists yet in the EU or England, and company progress is uneven. Of the 107 most influential European signatories of the Better Chicken Commitment tracked in the ChickenTrack 2025 report, published in March 2026, 76 reported progress, three were fully compliant, and 36 reported less than 10 percent progress on breed change. Eighteen UK brands, including KFC, Burger King and Nando's, have withdrawn their commitments ([Food and Beverage Business Europe](#)). In-ovo sexing, which spread quickly where chick culling was banned, is the one part of element 3 moving at pace.

Element 4, fish and invertebrates: one law promised, one farm stopped

England's commitment to legislate humane slaughter for farmed fish is the largest fish welfare step by a major government in this period. The Commission's list of planned animal welfare revisions contains no proposal on fish at slaughter ([European Commission](#)), although the 2009 slaughter regulation itself said separate standards for fish should be established ([Regulation \(EC\) No 1099/2009](#)).

On octopus farming the preventive approach succeeded without a national law. In late July 2026 Nueva Pescanova withdrew its application for a €50 million farm at the port of Las Palmas in Gran Canaria, which would have produced 3,000 tonnes a year from about a million octopuses, more than 10 percent of Spain's octopus output. It cited business and regulatory reasons after the Canary Islands' environmental assessment raised concerns about odour near a passenger terminal and water quality in the port, and it left open other sites or designs ([The Olive Press](#)), so a legal ban is still needed.

Element 5, insects: the industry slowed before regulation arrived

Rethink Priorities found that 36 percent of the roughly \$2 billion invested in insect farming through mid-2024 had gone to companies that had since stopped operating or entered court-supervised restructuring, and its median projection for 2030 output is less than half of a 2021 Rabobank forecast ([Rethink Priorities](#)). The largest failure came in December 2025, when a French commercial court ordered the liquidation of Ynsect, which had raised more than \$500 million and ran an industrial mealworm plant near Dole. Insects used as feed cost two to ten times as much as soy or fishmeal, according to the Insect Institute ([AgFunderNews](#)).

Even the slower path implies trillions of insects killed a year by 2030. EU law sets no welfare requirements for farmed insects at slaughter, and industry guidance is voluntary ([Zięty et al., Insects](#)). The US Animal Welfare Act, limited to warm-blooded animals, does not reach them. The Commission's list of planned welfare revisions covers hens, broilers, pigs and transport and includes no measure on insects ([European Commission](#)).

Element 6, research animals: the fastest-moving element

- **United States.** On 10 April 2025 the FDA announced a plan to phase out animal testing requirements for monoclonal antibodies and other drugs ([FDA](#)). On 8 July 2025 the National Institutes of Health said it would no longer issue funding calls exclusively for animal models ([Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine](#)). By April 2026 the FDA had issued draft guidance on reducing primate testing for monoclonal antibodies and updated endotoxin testing guidance in a way it says could spare more than a million horseshoe crabs a year ([FDA](#)). In September 2026 it issued a direct final rule stating that nonclinical tests may include cell-based assays, organs-on-chips and computer models as well as animal testing ([FDA](#)).
- **United Kingdom.** On 11 November 2025 the government published a strategy to replace animals in science, with a £30 million preclinical models hub ([GOV.UK](#)). Its targets are to replace the rabbit pyrogen test by the end of 2025, end animal testing for skin and eye irritation and skin sensitisation by the end of 2026, end mouse potency tests for botulinum toxin by 2027, and cut pharmacokinetic studies on dogs and primates by at least 35 percent by 2030 ([Cruelty Free International](#)).

- **European Union.** On 1 June 2026 the Commission adopted a roadmap towards phasing out animal testing in chemical safety assessments, covering industrial chemicals, pharmaceuticals and food additives, with more than 30 recommendations and no binding end dates ([European Commission](#)).

Research policy moved further than any other part of the plan. The UK strategy comes closest to element 6 because it names tests and dates; the US changes rest on guidance and funding policy that a later administration could reverse.

Element 7, alternative proteins: money down, regulation divided

Private investment in alternative proteins fell to \$881 million in 2025 from about \$1.1 billion in 2024. Plant-based companies raised \$450 million, more than the year before, while fermentation companies raised \$357 million and cultivated meat and seafood companies \$74 million, both down sharply ([FoodNavigator](#)).

The FDA cleared Wildtype's cultivated salmon on 28 May 2025, and it went on sale at a restaurant in Portland, Oregon, the following month ([AgFunderNews](#)). Seven companies worldwide now hold regulatory clearance, with sales permitted in Singapore, the United States and Australia ([vegconomist](#)). Several US states moved the other way: Texas became the seventh state to ban cultivated meat, from 1 September 2025 ([Food Safety Magazine](#)), and South Dakota's five-year prohibition took effect on 1 July 2026 ([CSG Midwest](#)).

Element 7 faces a harder environment than in 2021: private money has shrunk, public investment since 2021 is a quarter of the Good Food Institute's annual benchmark, and some legislatures are closing markets before products arrive. The move of private money towards plant-based products already on sale is a reasonable correction after years of optimistic cost forecasts.

Element 8, livelihoods and the wider shocks of 2026

The wider shocks of 2026 bear on animal welfare mainly through prices; the Justice Department's case against California and the NFU's opposition to a cage ban both rest on the cost of food. With fertilizer and energy prices raised by the Iran war and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, affordability arguments will likely weigh more heavily against reform in 2027, which strengthens the case for transition funding and long phase-ins. On climate, food accounts for about 26 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and livestock and fisheries for 31 percent of food emissions ([Our World in Data](#)), so policies that reduce the number of animals farmed serve both goals.

Part III: Revised priorities

Priorities for the next six to twelve months, in order:

1. **Settle the state-standards question in the US farm bill conference without leaving a gap.** If Congress removes the reach of state confinement laws for pigs and calves, it should replace them with a federal floor for those animals and a phase-in period for producers.
2. **Publish the EU hens and broilers proposal by the end of 2026 with firm dates and import equivalence,** and add a timetable for farmed fish slaughter rules.
3. **Finalise the UK cage ban on the consultation's first option, no new cages from 2027 and none at all from 2032,** and publish the draft farmed fish slaughter law, using Norway's rules and its known documentation gaps as a guide.
4. **Hold research regulators to their dates,** starting with the UK's end-2026 deadline for skin irritation and sensitisation tests and a final version of the FDA's guidance on primate studies.
5. **Bring farmed insects within EU farm animal welfare law** and set slaughter standards while the industry is small.
6. **Keep the approval route for alternative proteins open** and direct public money to open research and shared production capacity.
7. **Turn the Gran Canaria outcome into a ban on commercial octopus farming,** starting in Spain and the EU.

Conclusion

The evidence of animal consciousness is strongest for mammals and birds, the animals most affected by cages, crates and fast-growth breeding, and the policy response in 2025 and 2026 followed that gradient. The EU and the UK are preparing cage bans, research regulators on both sides of the Atlantic have begun to retire specific animal tests, and the United States is split between states that set welfare standards and a federal government that has tried, so far without success in court, to override them. Fish, crustaceans and insects, most of the animals humans kill, remain almost entirely outside binding law in the EU and the United States, and the UK has so far only promised a law for farmed fish.

The record of 2025 and 2026 supports the plan's main assumptions: legal deadlines have held better than voluntary pledges, which companies withdrew by the dozen; research policy moved fastest where regulators named tests and dates; and the withdrawn octopus farm showed that a new animal industry is easiest to stop before it is built. The next year turns on the US farm bill conference, the Commission's hens and broilers proposal and the UK cage consultation response, all still pending in late September 2026.

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